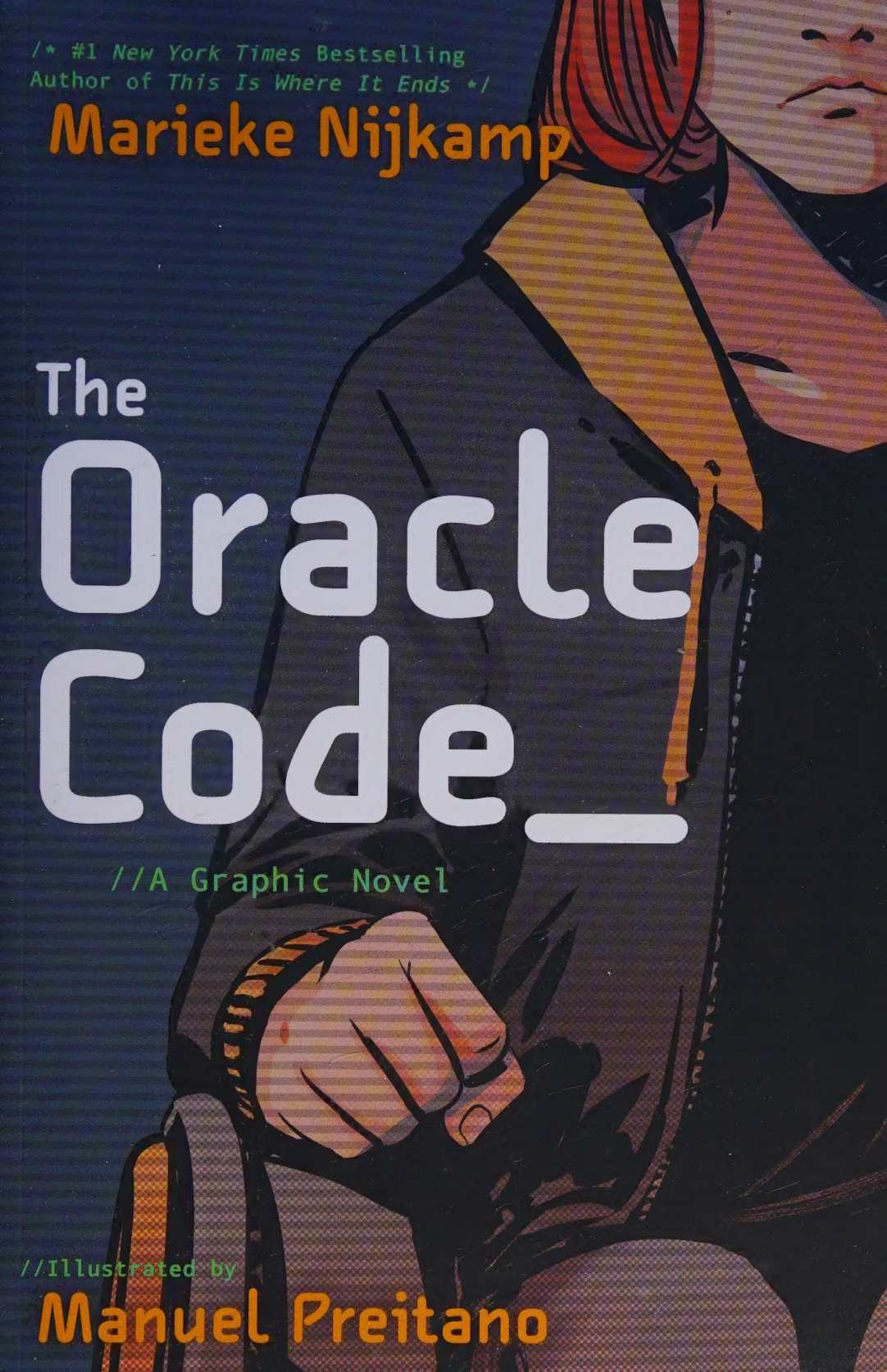
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The
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//A Graphic Novel
//Illustrated by
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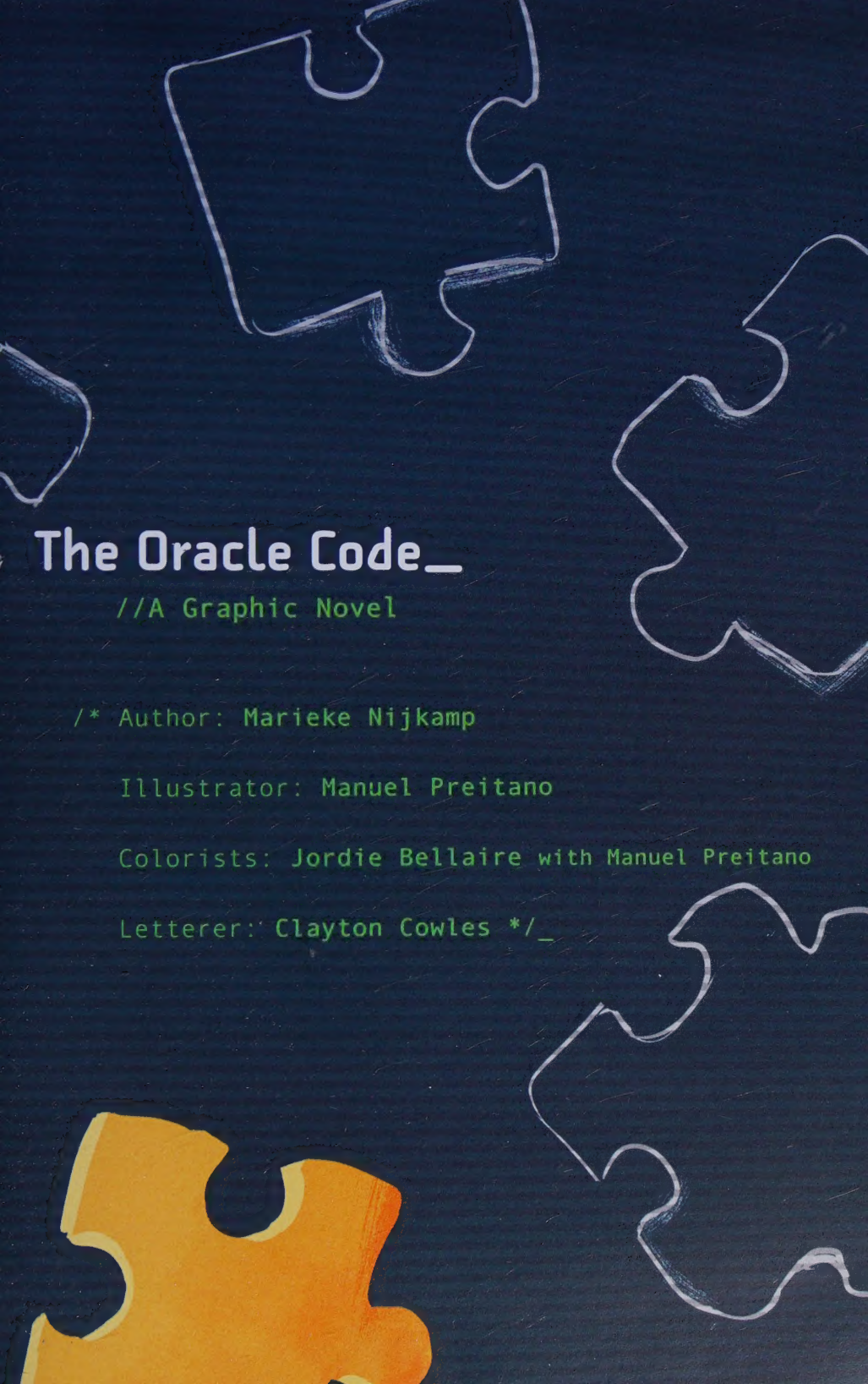
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/* Author: Marieke Nijkamp
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Colorists: Jordie Bellaire with Manuel Preitano
Letterer: Clayton Cowles */_

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//## DC - a WarnerMedia Company.

//## DC Comics, 2900 West Alameda Ave., Burbank, CA 91505
//## Printed by LSC Communications, Crawfordsville, IN, USA. 1/31/20. First Printing.
//## ISBN: 978-1-4012-9066-5

//## Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Nijkamp, Marieke, writer. | Preitano, Manuel, illustrator, colourist. | Bellaire, Jordie, colourist. | Cowles, Clayton, letterer.
Title: The oracle code / writer, Marieke Nijkamp ; illustrator, Manuel Preitano ; colorists, Jordie Bellaire with Manuel Preitano ; letterer, Clayton Cowles.
Description: Burbank, CA : DC Comics, [2020] | Audience: Ages 13+ | Audience: Grades 10-12 | Summary: "After a gunshot leaves her paralyzed, Barbara Gordon enters the Arkham Center for Independence, where Gotham's teens undergo physical and mental rehabilitation. Now using a wheelchair, Barbara must adapt to a new normal, but she cannot shake the feeling that something is dangerously amiss."-- Provided by publisher.
Identifiers: LCCN 2019041188 (print) | LCCN 2019041189 (ebook) | ISBN 9781401290665 (paperback) | ISBN 9781779502377 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Graphic novels. | CYAC: Graphic novels. | People with disabilities--Fiction. | Rehabilitation--Fiction. | Self-Actualization (Psychology)--Fiction. | Mystery and detective stories.
Classification: LCC PZ7.7.N54 Or 2020 (print) | LCC PZ7.7.N54 (ebook) | DDC 741.5/973--dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2019041188
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2019041189

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chapter: 1

GOTHAM CITY.
I've always wondered what it feels like to fly.
To be so high up in the clouds, the city down below looks like a puzzle. The well-lit streets? Mazes. The blocks and buildings? Puzzle pieces.
Just waiting to be solved.
I would never have to be afraid.

Because with a bit of perspective, *everything* is a puzzle.
And I'm *so close* to solving this one.
GCPD
FLAG{L1GHTN1N98U9S}
Got it!

Sixty whole points...
And a ten-flag streak for Barbara Gordon, master hacker.

Connecting the dots almost feels like flying.
Asset to our team. Menace to my ego.
Your ego can handle it.

Speaking of ego, did you settle on a hacker name yet? You only have to beat one more challenge to claim a profile on the server.
Almost. I—
WOOP WOOP WOOP

It's my dad.
That's the third time this week.
Do you think something's going on?
Something's always going on. And he's always in the thick of it.
≥kssht≤... Armed robbery at 23rd and Yale. All units respond.
That's only five blocks away.
I know. Are you coming?
Dad always says: fear is in the unknown.
With a bit of perspective, maybe this doesn't have to be quite so scary either.
Benjamin?
Turns out I forgot one essential detail.

The higher you fly...
GCPD

THE ARKHAM CENTER FOR INDEPENDENCE.
SIX WEEKS LATER.
The harder you fall.

This'll be good for you. The A.C.I. is a world-class facility and we're lucky to be here.
I know.

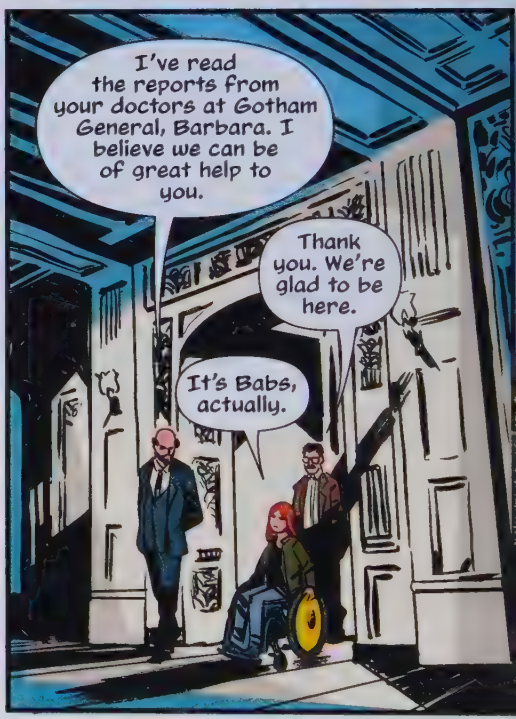
They'll do everything they can to help you.
I know.

I can manage.

Are you sure?
I said I'm fine.

Barbara Gordon? Commissioner Gordon?
I'm Dr. Harland Maxwell.
Welcome to the A.C.I.

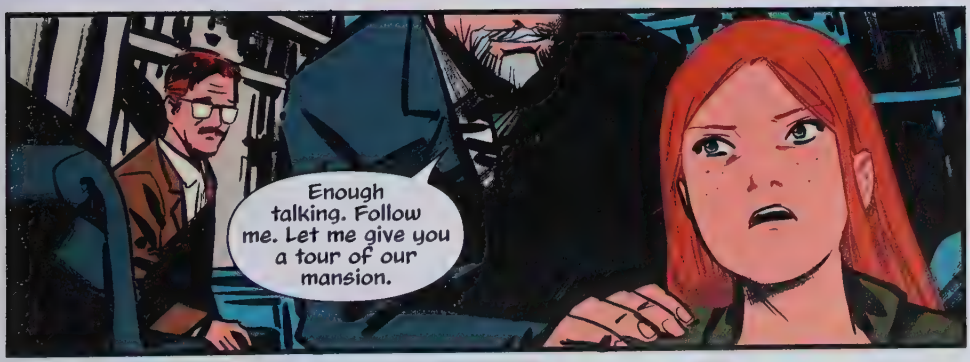
Come. Leave your bags.


I've read the reports from your doctors at Gotham General, Barbara. I believe we can be of great help to you.
Thank you. We're glad to be here.
It's Babs, actually.

Here at the A.C.I. we believe in an integral approach to rehabilitation, and we'll put together a team of therapists to monitor and stimulate Barbara's progress.

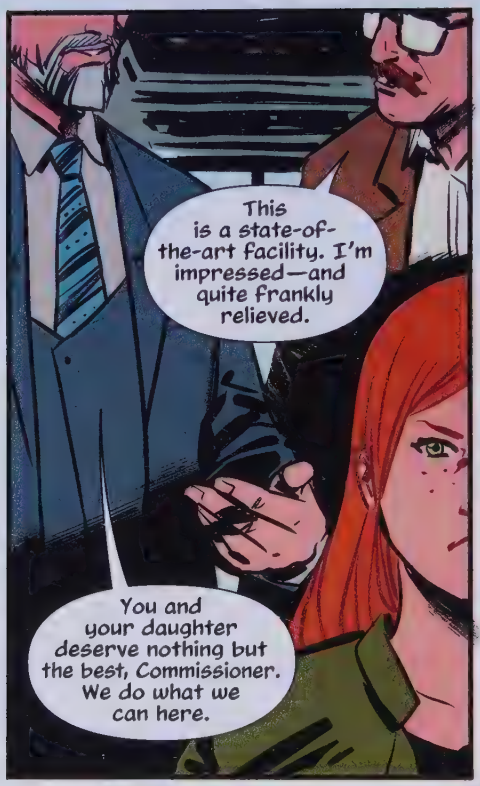
We understand that learning to live with disability is a long and emotional road, so let me say how honored I am that you've chosen the A.C.I. for Barbara.
We've managed to help hundreds of patients over the years, and we continuously try to improve our levels of care.

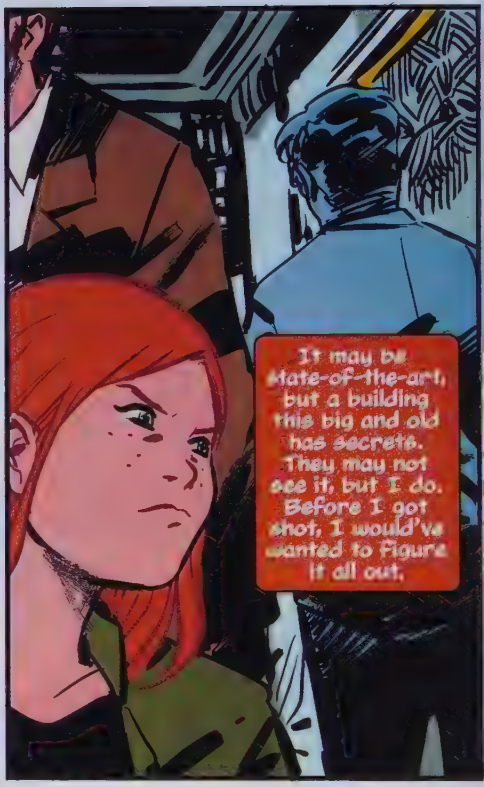
SKTCH
SKRRTCH


Enough talking. Follow me. Let me give you a tour of our mansion.

We are proud of the community we built here. Our patients don't just come here to rehabilitate, they come here to live.
For all of us here at the A.C.I., this building is a home away from home.
We hope you'll come to consider it the same for the duration of your stay.

CATS

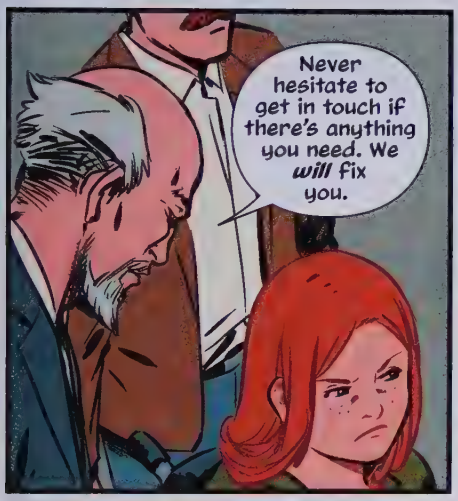

This is a state-of-the-art facility. I'm impressed—and quite frankly relieved.
You and your daughter deserve nothing but the best, Commissioner. We do what we can here.


It may be state-of-the-art, but a building this big and old has secrets. They may not see it, but I do. Before I got shot, I would've wanted to figure it all out.

I would've wanted to *understand*. But I've tried to understand, and it didn't stop me from getting hurt. Why should I care again?
I don't want to be home here.
I just want to be *home*.

I'm at the A.C.I. now, Ben.
In case you wanted to come visit.
I miss you.

Tomorrow you'll meet your therapists. You'll find everyone is here to help you.
Ugh.


Never hesitate to get in touch if there's anything you need. We *will* fix you.

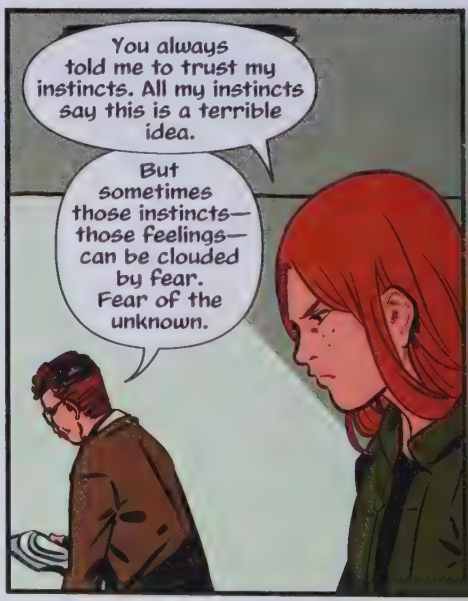
You *can't* fix me. It's pointless. I knew exactly who I was, but everything has shattered.

Sweetheart, they're trying to help you.
I don't *need* their help.

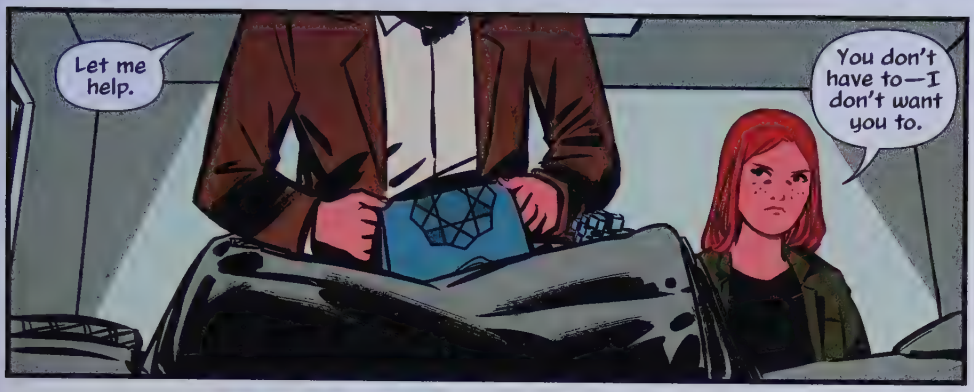
You do need help, Barbara. You'll come to see that, too.
But we all understand it takes time to settle in here. I'll leave you be.

This is a nice-looking room.
Think of it as a blank canvas, sweetheart. Or a... what do you call it... unwritten code. You can make it your own.

I don't need a new room. I have my old room.
I know this is hard on both of us, but I need you to try living here.


You always told me to trust my instincts. All my instincts say this is a terrible idea.
But sometimes those instincts—those feelings—can be clouded by fear. Fear of the unknown.

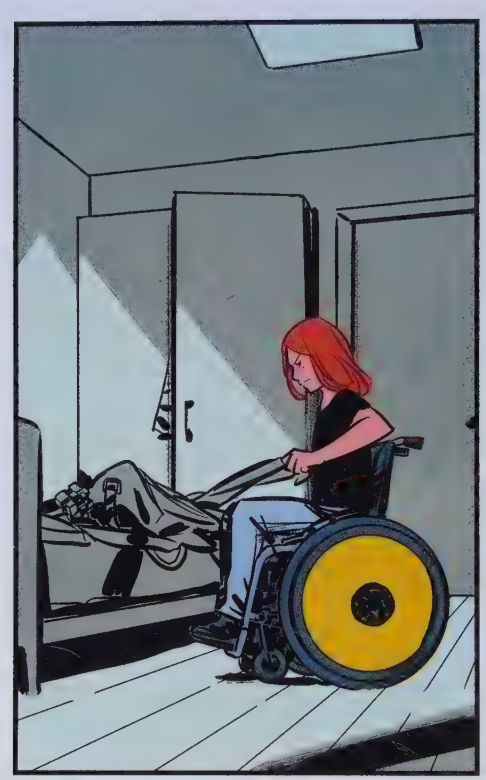
I'm not afraid.


Let me help.
You don't have to—I don't want you to.

Are you sure?
Dad.
You should probably go.

If that's what you want...
Please.

I'll call tomorrow.
I love you.



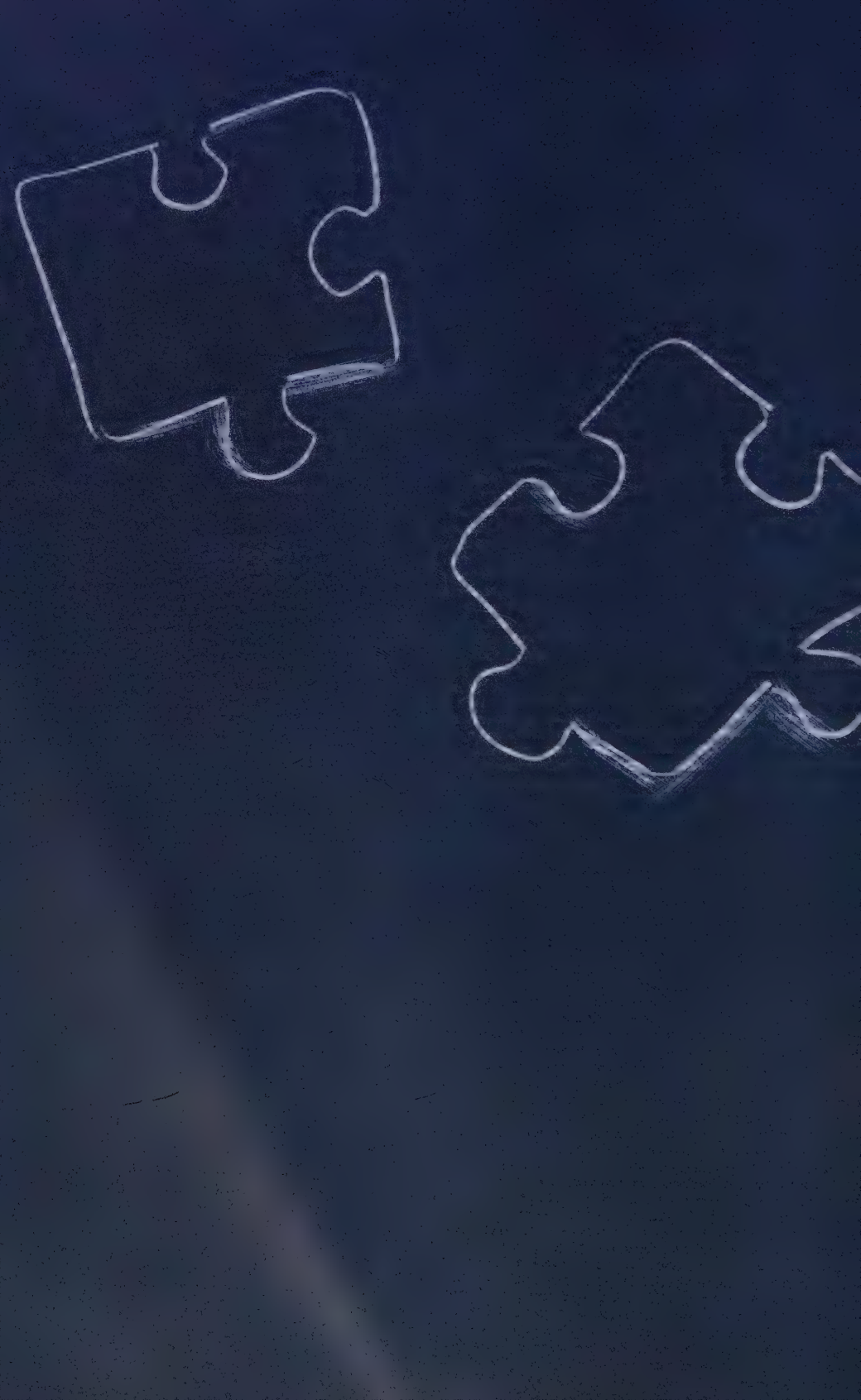
AAAAAAAARGH!

I hate this!

I want to be *home*, hacking with Benjamin.
I want to be back at school, and I'll even pay attention in history.
I want to be anywhere but in this *mess* of a situation.
I hate this.
Gibson · NEUROMANCER

This is your life now, Barbara Gordon.
sob

This is your life.



chapter: 2

Morning. Day one. Everything looks different like this.
Psst, new girl.
Welcome to the spectacular east wing.
Who are you? What are you in for?
This is Yeong. Meningitis.
And she's Issy. Spinal cord injury.
Babs. Wrong place, wrong time.

C'mon, we have breakfast in our kitchen.
You need to keep up your strength. Long days ahead.
I know the center is overwhelming at first—
But you get used to it.
We have a lot of fun here.
Great.
How long have you been here?
Nine months.
Four months, three weeks, two days. Give or take.
Eat up. Therapy is hard work.
Cheer-UP!
MILK
I can't wait.

PHYSICAL THERAPY WITH DR. LACHLAN.
Dr. Lachlan is nice enough. I don't hate him yet.
Before we establish your training regimen, let's see where your doctors left off. If you wouldn't mind?
I can manage this.
Harder than it looks?
It's fine.
You look like I do when I run from the basement to the attic and back. C'mon, you should be able to do this.
Okay, now I hate him.

THERAPY WITH DR. MAXWELL.
Digging up bad memories. It's as wonderful as it sounds.
Here at the A.C.I., we want to work not just on your physical trauma, but on psychological trauma as well.
The robbery left its scars—whether they're anger or fear or pain—and I want to work with you to find healing.
I don't want to talk about it.
We'll have to. One way or another.

THE A.C.I. SOMEWHERE.
I always used to know where I was going.
I guess not anymore.
C'mon, think.
≠sob≠
There's something not quite—no.

Stick to finding the way back, Babs.
Puzzles are not for me. Not anymore.
SCREEEEEEEEEEE
EEEEEEEEEE

Babs, over here!

How was therapy with the Professor?
The Professor?
Dr. Maxwell. Have you *seen* his office?
He creeps me out.
He is... intense.
Anyway. Are you into sports? Wheelchair basketball? Murderball?
Let her settle in first.
Just because you're not into sports...
Give her time.
She'd be playing murderball already if the Professor hadn't forbidden it.
I love you but you're impossible.
I miss bickering, too.

COURTYARD. SKILLS TRAINING.
Welcome to Skills Training. This will be the fun part of your day.
Sure it will be.
You're all relatively new to your wheelchairs. You may still think it's easy to navigate in your chair. You'd be wrong.
We'll teach you all the tricks you need to know. Obstacles. Different surfaces. Ramps. Falls. We'll teach you to take care of your chair and yourself.
I can manage just fine by myself.
First, let's get to know each other! It's dodgeball time!

Oh.

No.

=urgh=

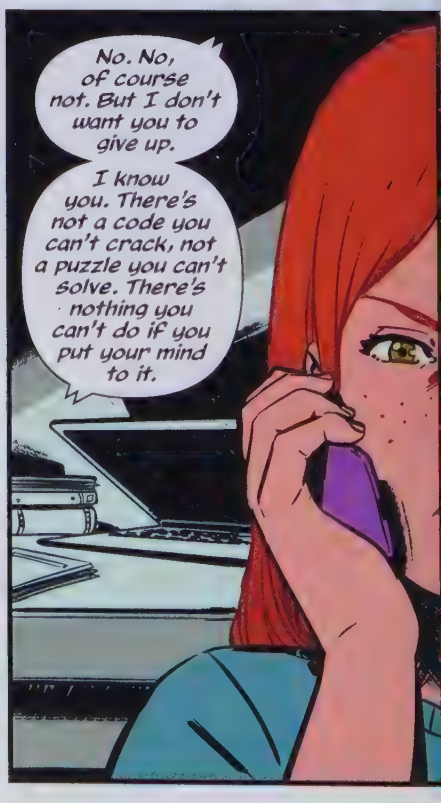
So much fun.

"I don't want to stay..."

I hate it here, Dad.
They're trying to help you. They're trying to fix you.

Some things can't be fixed.
They need you to try, too.

Are you saying I haven't tried?


No. No, of course not. But I don't want you to give up.
I know you. There's not a code you can't crack, not a puzzle you can't solve. There's nothing you can't do if you put your mind to it.

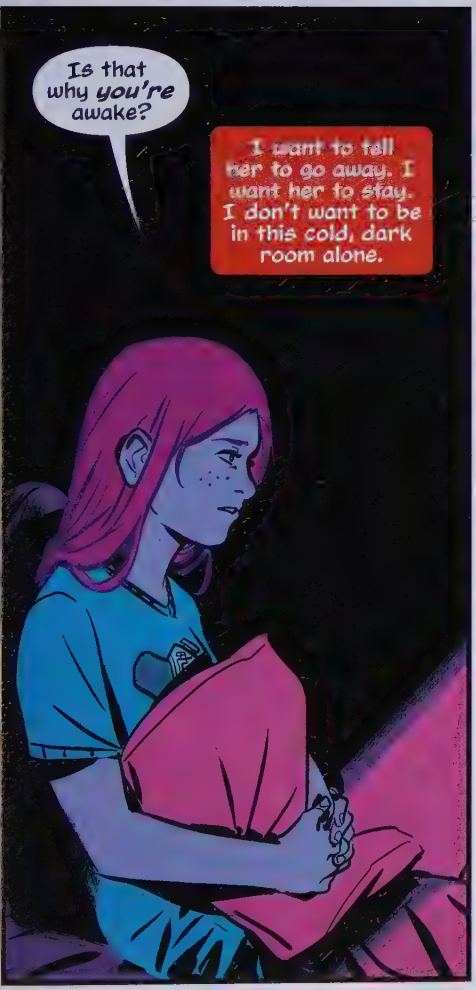
I couldn't stop that bullet.
Barbara...
I can't solve this puzzle, because I'm the puzzle now. I can't crack the code, because I'm the code.
But if you would just try...
Bye, Dad.
I am trying. I can't make it stop hurting.

OCPD
THAT NIGHT.

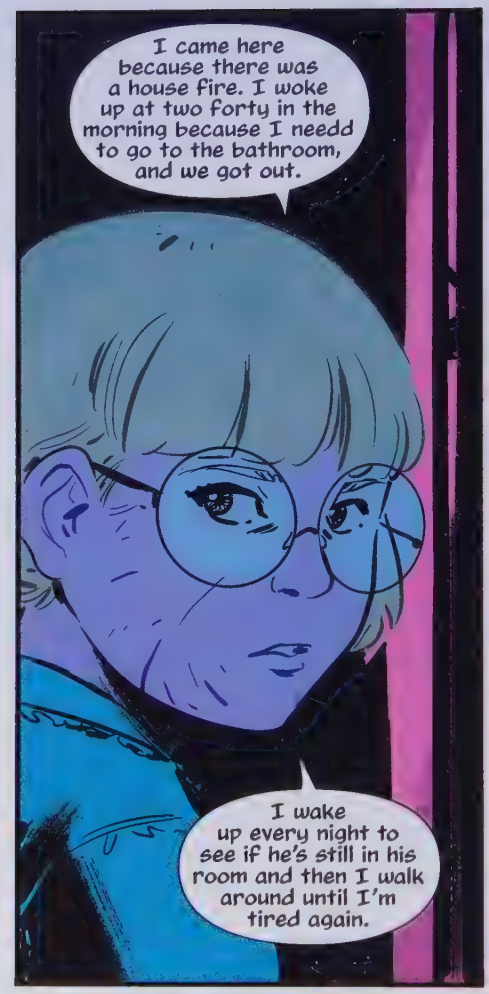
HEEEELP!
HEY! Back off!

Stop it. Stop it.
Are you okay? You were screaming.
I'm fine. Who are you?
You don't look fine.
I'm Jena. I live down the hall.
Can I come in?

I'm Babs.
It's lonely those first nights, isn't it?
You'll get used to it, though, I promise.


Is that why you're awake?
I want to tell her to go away. I want her to stay. I don't want to be in this cold, dark room alone.

I always wake up to check on Michael. My twin brother. I need to know he's safe.
What do you mean?


I came here because there was a house fire. I woke up at two forty in the morning because I needd to go to the bathroom, and we got out.
I wake up every night to see if he's still in his room and then I walk around until I'm tired again.

Dr. Maxwell doesn't like it, but I'm quiet. Tonight I heard you cry, so I came to look.
When Michael has bad dreams, I tell him stories. Would you like me to tell you a story?

I'm not sure that'll help.
I know memories are terrible. Sometimes you can't stop being afraid.
But if you're going to be afraid anyway, it's easier to be afraid of things that aren't in your head.
And there are so many stories here
...Okay.

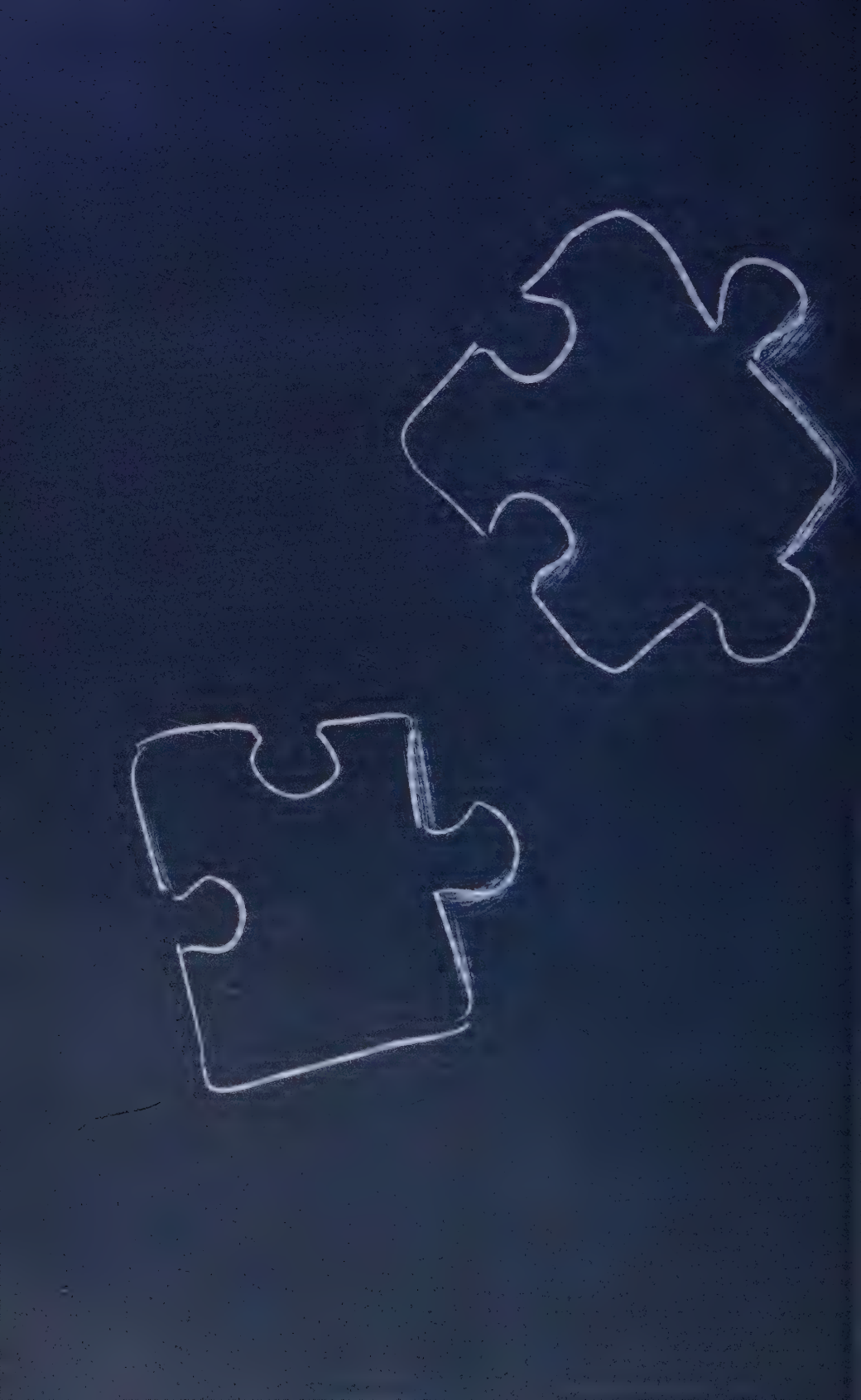
"Once upon a time there was a haunted conservatory. It stood on the withered grounds of an old, abandoned castle. Like one of those castles in fairy tales.
"Near the conservatory lived a boy and a girl, who'd become friends when the girl had moved there.
"They would go visit the conservatory together to look for the gost, though they never saw it.
"The ghost always saw them."

"One day the boy challenged the girl to go inside the conservatory to look for the ghost.
"The girl hesitated, but the boy insisted. Once she was inside, he locked the door.
"The girl walked around the conservatory. She found no ghosts, only dead plants and shadows. The shadows clawed at her and gnawed at her, but she kept walking.
"When she found a crack in the glass, she pushed through, and once outside, she found the boy waiting for her.
"She yelled at him and punched him and he told her he hadn't intended to hurt her. And besides, she'd made her way out, hadn't she?
"Neither of them noticed one of the shadows had put its teeth into the girl and followed her out."

"That night the girl didn't sleep well. The shadow that had bit her kept eating and the shadows around her grew.
"In the morning she looked in the mirror and half of her had become shadow.
"She took a light and pointed it at her shadow arm, which started to fade immediately.
"And still it kept gnawing.
"She took her coat and went back to the conservatory, to search for the ghost and the part of her she had lost."

"When she'd walked around the conservatory once, twice, three times, the boy was there. He'd come looking for her.
"She showed him how the shadows were eating away at her. As she removed her coat, she found even more of her was starting to disappear.
"The boy immediately pushed her away from him, into the conservatory once more to keep her shadows company. He locked the door. He barred the cracked windows. He blocked all the exits.
"The last part of her to fade was her hand against the window. The conservatory remained haunted. There were no ghosts, only lost girls and shadows.
"And the boy waited for the next girl to feed to the darkness."

Sweet dreams. I hope.



chapter: 3

Day two. I don't know if last night's visit was real or a strange dream.
I hope this old mansion didn't keep you up last night. She's a creaky old lady.
No...
Good, because we're going to start you off with upper body exercises. Get you more comfortable in that chair.
Dr. Lachlan is so different from Dr. Maxwell. He takes far too much pleasure in seeing me squirm, but he's so much easier to talk to.
I think I had a visitor last night. Jena?
Ah, Jena. Our sleepwalker.
Mind your posture, please.

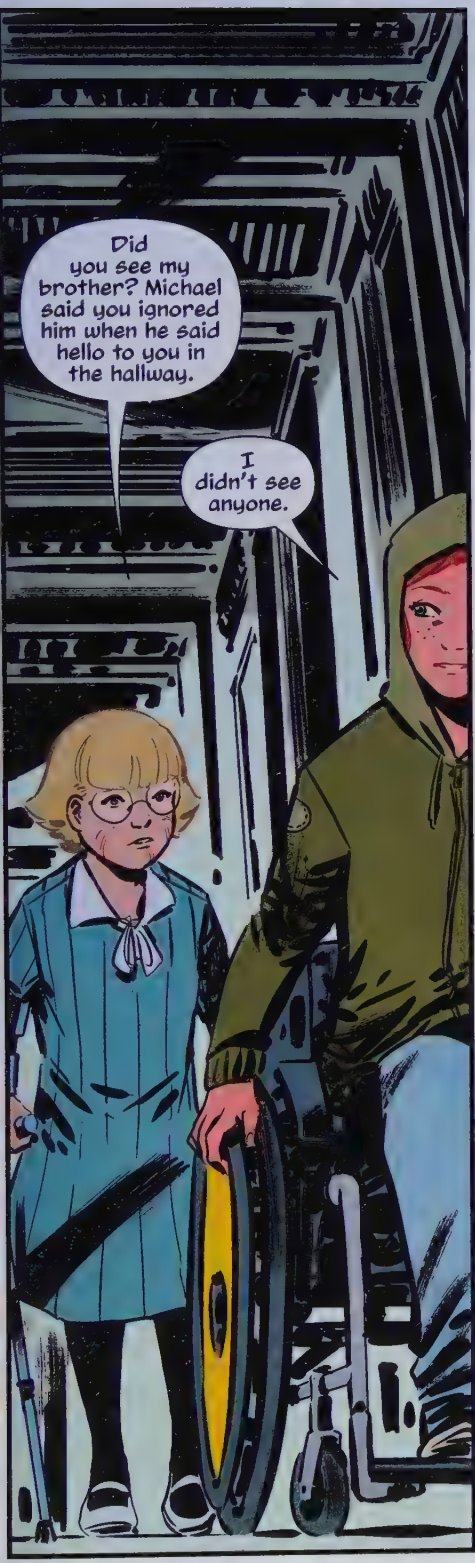
Does she wander every night?
As far as we can tell. She's a good kid, but she's hurt. As I'm sure you know, too, not all scars are physical.
Did she... lose...anyone in the fire?
She barely got out in time. Her parents, unfortunately, didn't. A generous benefactor paid for her treatment here.
≥unf≤
If you can, be there for her. She could use a friend.
And mind you don't push yourself too hard. I know every one of you tries to cheat the system, but you won't get out of here any faster.

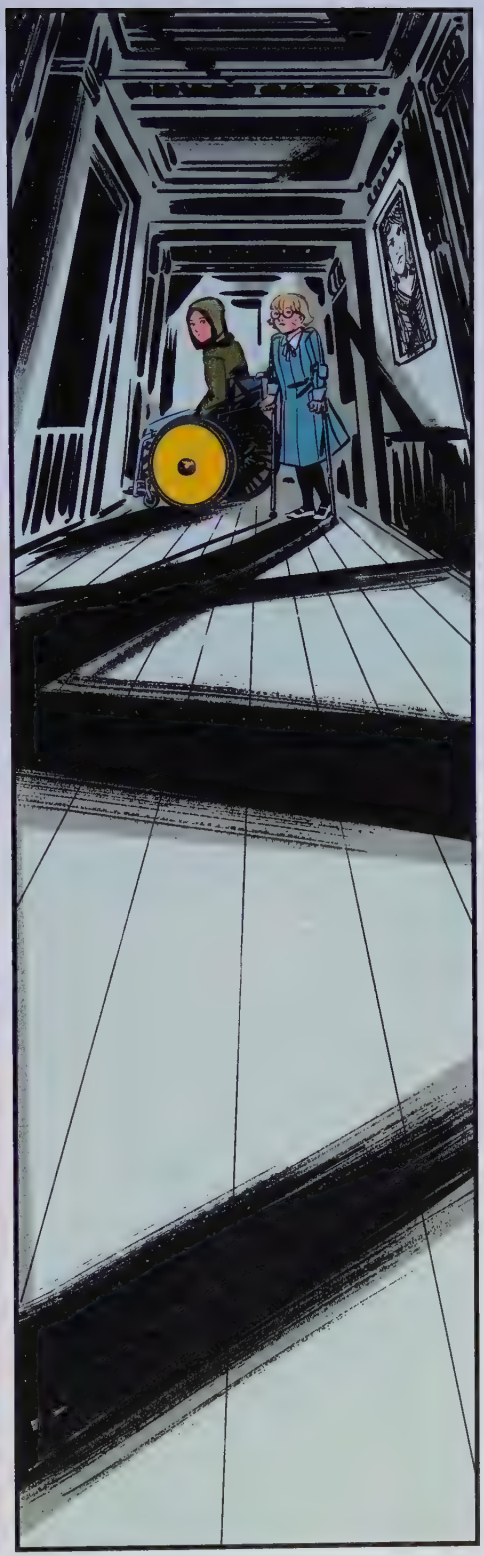
Day five. I don't want to make friends, because they all inevitably leave.
How's therapy with the Professor?

I hate it.
It's fine.
I'm glad I graduated from that stage. I don't miss his creepy stares and questions.

Insert awkward silence.
Right. Gotta go. Practice time!

I don't want to be hurt again.
Babs?


Did you see my brother? Michael said you ignored him when he said hello to you in the hallway.
I didn't see anyone.



Day eleven. So much about this center doesn't make sense, and I can't stop being curious. I can't stop thinking about Jen: and her stories.
24
Do you want to come out to our basketball game tonight? It's the first of the new season. It's going to be fun.
Wonders
We can go together. I can explain the game to you.
I taught her all she knows.

But I can stop them from trying to make friends with me.
I don't think tonight is a good night, I'm sorry.
Why not? Are you going to curl up with your computer? I've seen you, Babs, you just stare at a blank screen.
Yeong.
This is why.
No new messages.

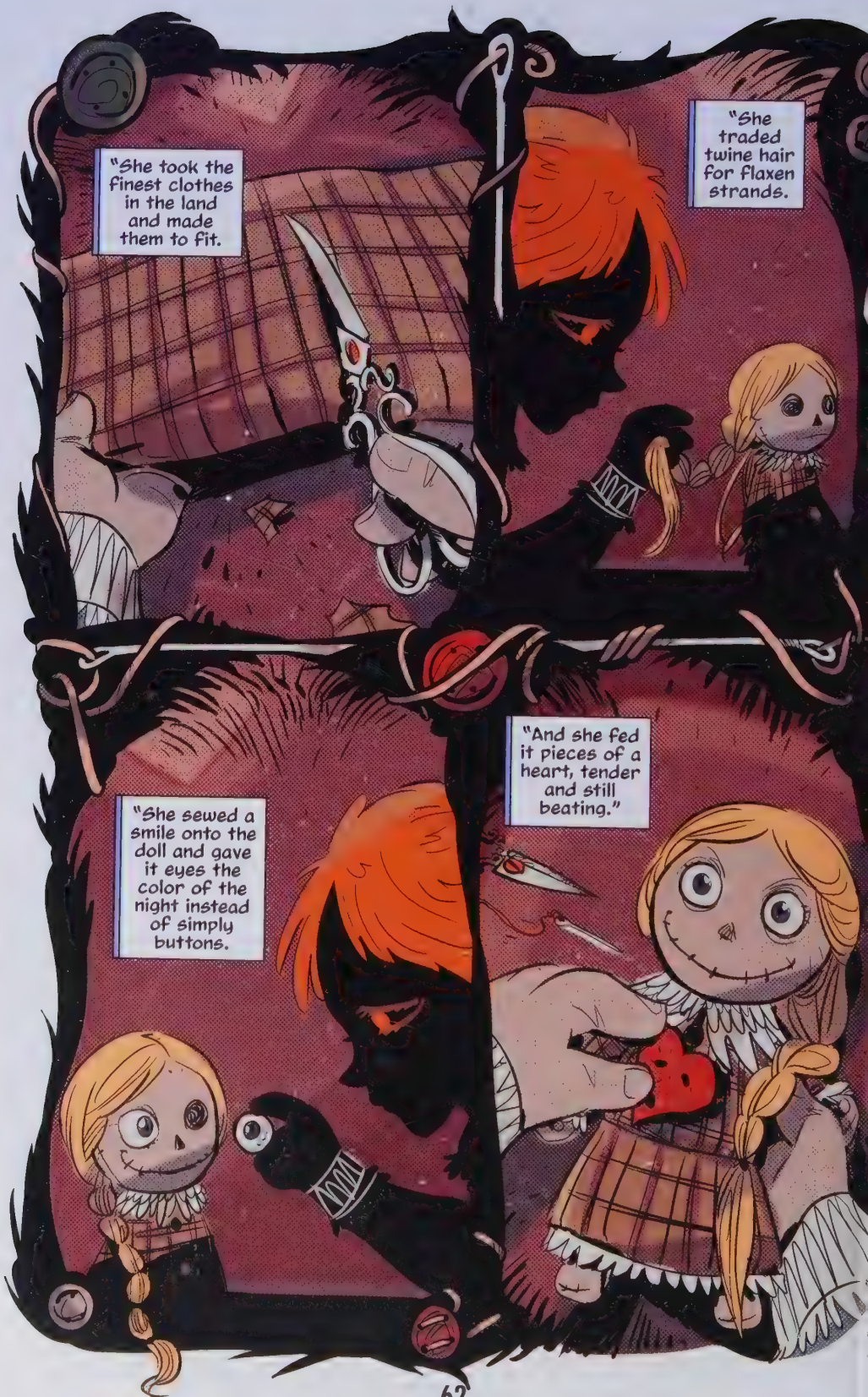
Day eighteen. At least the days follow patterns. And I'm getting better at some things.

Hey!
Like biped slalom.

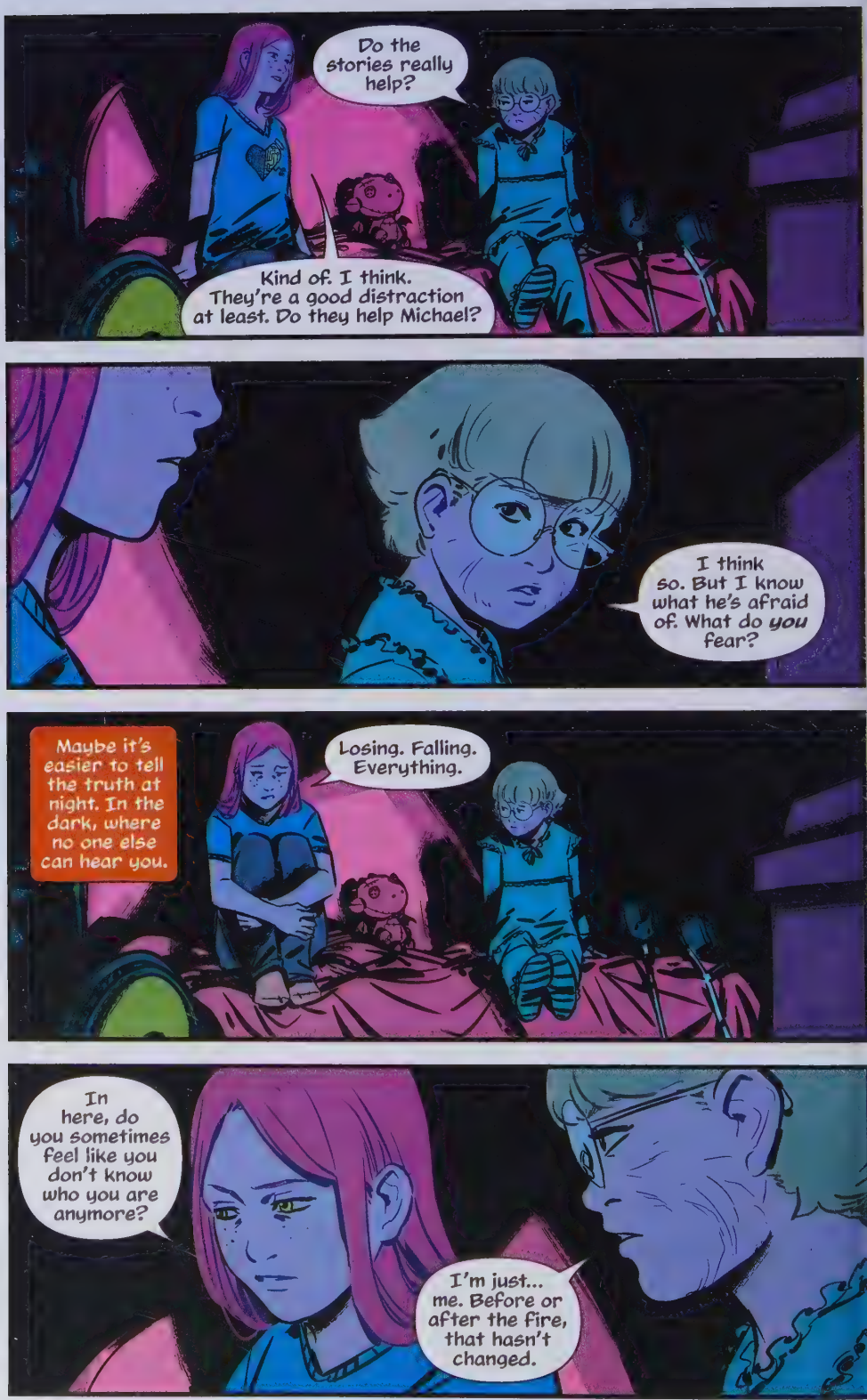
And low curbs.
And not-too-steep ramps.
And being too stubborn and trying too hard.
I hate this.
CRASH

THAT NIGHT.
It will get easier, Babs.
"There once was a girl who had no friends. She spent her nights alone, with her creations. She tried to make friends, just like she tried to make dolls. But no one would want to be around her.
"And the dolls kept falling apart."
Gather two buttons for eyes...
And seven yards of thread...
A dress made of three pieces...
We'll put this doll to bed.

"Rag dolls, they were, all of them. None could please her. They were not perfect, so they were not good enough. And the more she failed, the angrier she got.
"Whenever the girl showed the dolls to the children around her, they would laugh at her until she would rip the dolls to pieces.
"She would pick up the pieces and try again. But they were never perfect enough.
"Until one night she had an idea."


"She took the finest clothes in the land and made them to fit.
"She traded twine hair for flaxen strands.
"She sewed a smile onto the doll and gave it eyes the color of the night instead of simply buttons.
"And she fed it pieces of a heart, tender and still beating."

"There once was a girl who made new friends. She made them out of pieces of cloth and twine, skin and sinew. And they were perfect."
Gather a pair of eyes...
And seven yards of thread...
A smile made of three memories...
We'll put them all to bed.


Do the stories really help?
Kind of. I think. They're a good distraction at least. Do they help Michael?
I think so. But I know what he's afraid of. What do you fear?
Maybe it's easier to tell the truth at night. In the dark, where no one else can hear you.
Losing. Falling. Everything.
In here, do you sometimes feel like you don't know who you are anymore?
I'm just... me. Before or after the fire, that hasn't changed.

Or maybe the truth is always hard. I don't even know how she can feel like that.
I don't know who I am. I don't know who I can be.
Do you... do you want to talk about it?
No, I don't.
I know losing people hurts.
Maybe you should go, Jena.

Babs!
I checked on Michael earlier tonight and he was asleep.
I just walked by his room and it was empty, as if he'd never been there at all.
Enough stories for one night.
I don't know who else to go to.
Help me. Please help me.
Jena.

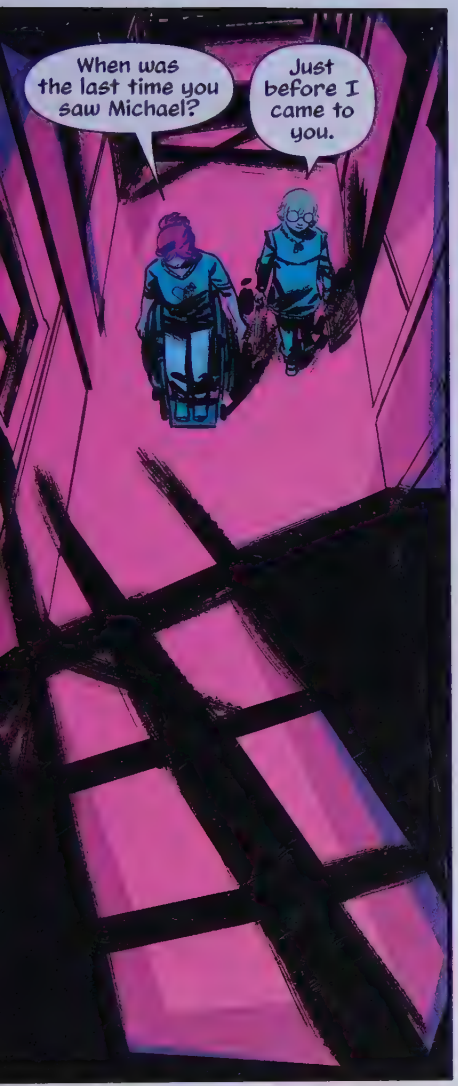
I wasn't going to do this. I wasn't going to do this.
I wasn't going to do this. But Jena needs help.

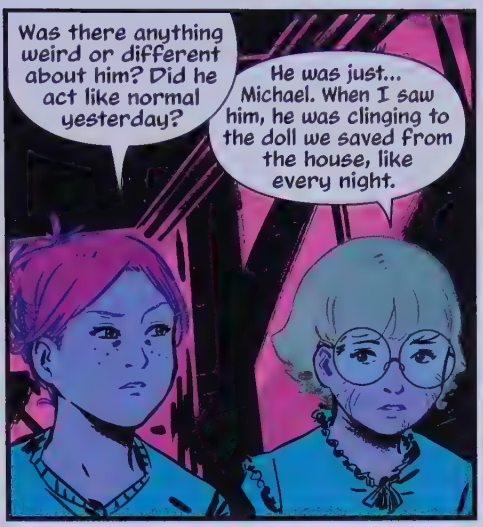
C'mon, let's go.

I was horrible to Jena.
And this building has secrets. I know it.

I'm sorry I—
Not now, please.

Okay. Let's go find your brother.

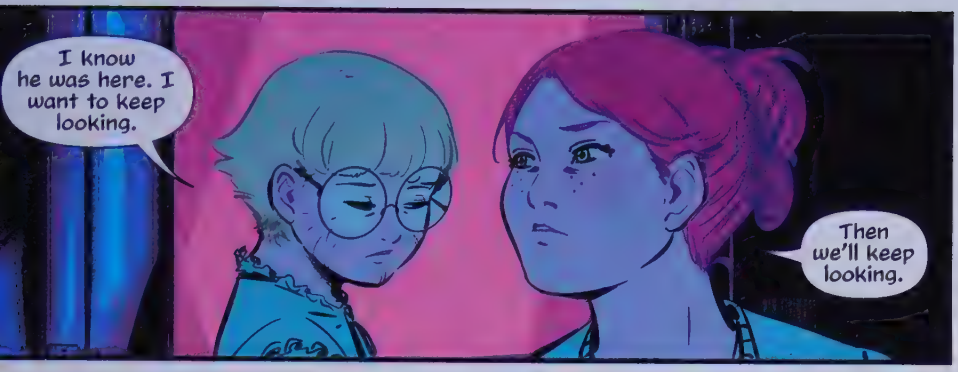

When was the last time you saw Michael?
Just before I came to you.


Was there anything weird or different about him? Did he act like normal yesterday?
He was just... Michael. When I saw him, he was clinging to the doll we saved from the house, like every night.

C'mon. It's a puzzle. You can do this.
What kind of doll?
He has a Robin, I have a photo. It's all that's left.

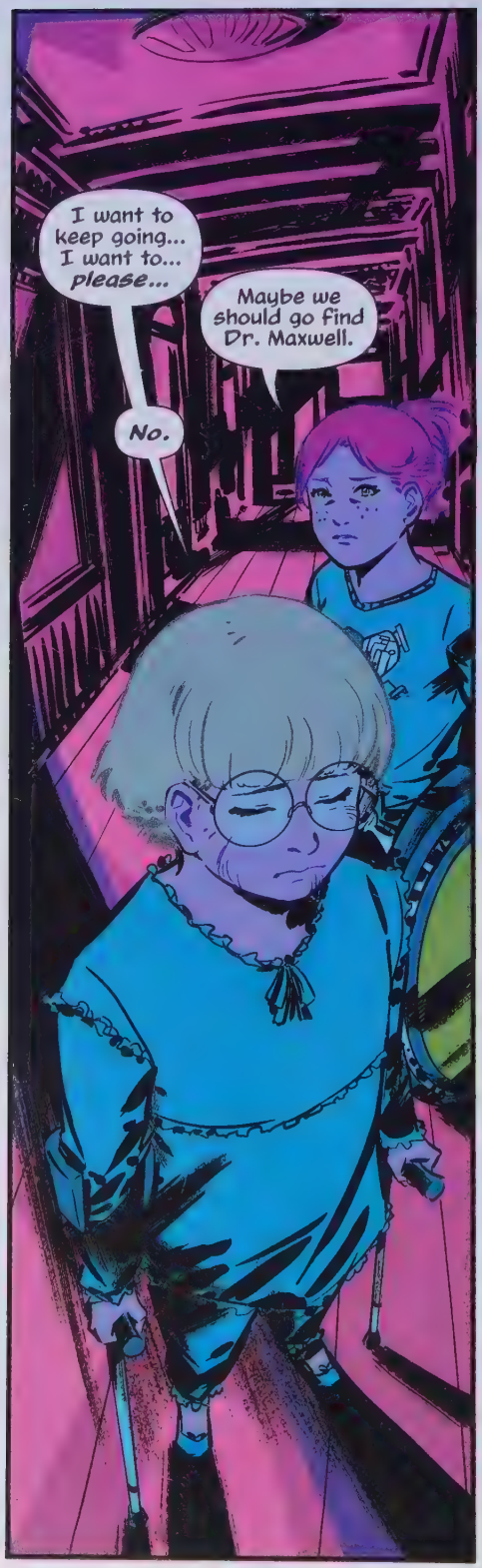
Just breathe.

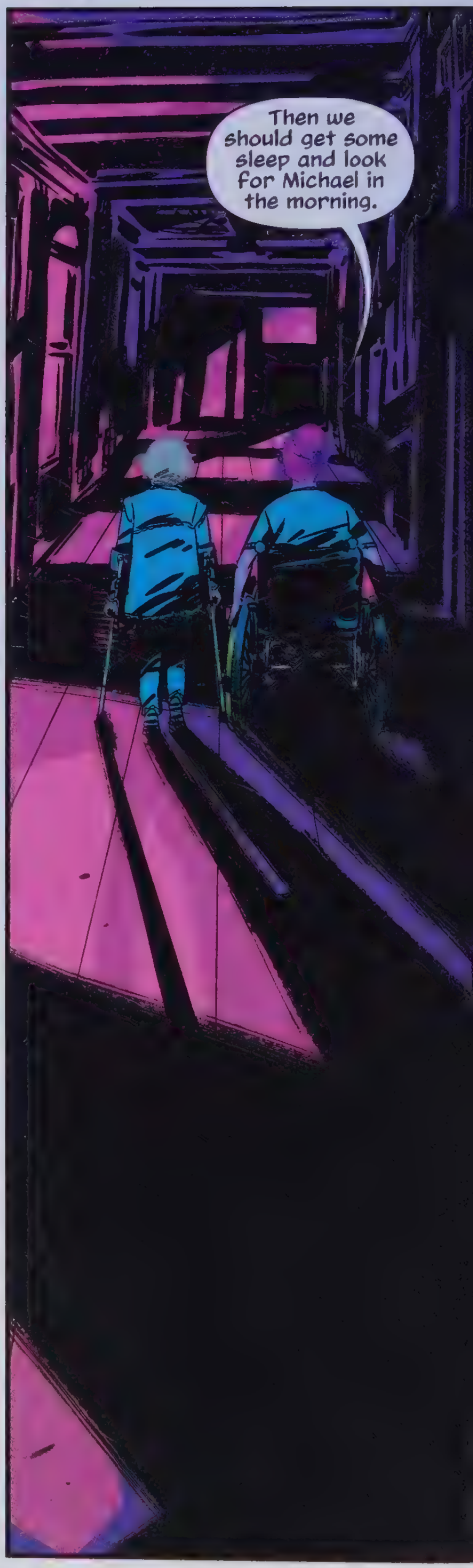
The room is empty. Not just empty—unused.
It's impossible to think Michael was just here an hour ago.
There's no trace of him at all.
He was here. I promise.
:sob:


I know he was here. I want to keep looking.
Then we'll keep looking.

We'll keep looking until we find him or until it's hopeless. And even then...
SCREEEEEEEEEEEEE
SKRRTCH
Creak

Dad once told me that even a hopeless situation doesn't always stop him. Not because he believes there'll be a miracle, but because giving up feels too final.
And pretending is a form of grieving, too.


I want to keep going... I want to... please...
Maybe we should go find Dr. Maxwell.
No.


Then we should get some sleep and look for Michael in the morning.

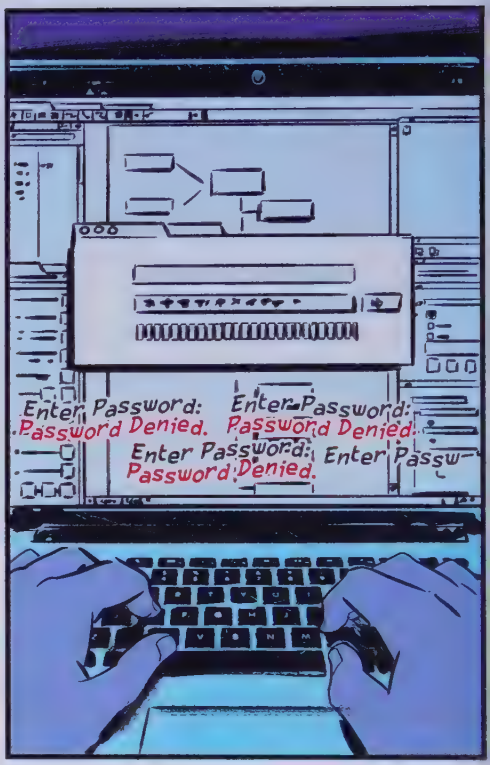
This looks familiar...

Do I need to tell you a story? Would it help?
Stories never help.

What do you mean? They helped *me*.
But the stories you'll tell won't be *true*.

And sometimes you keep going because of instinct.
Because it may look hopeless, but you feel in your gut you don't have the whole truth yet.

Let's see if I've still got it.
Is it weird that I miss my gloves? Even hackers need a superhero costume.


Enter Password:
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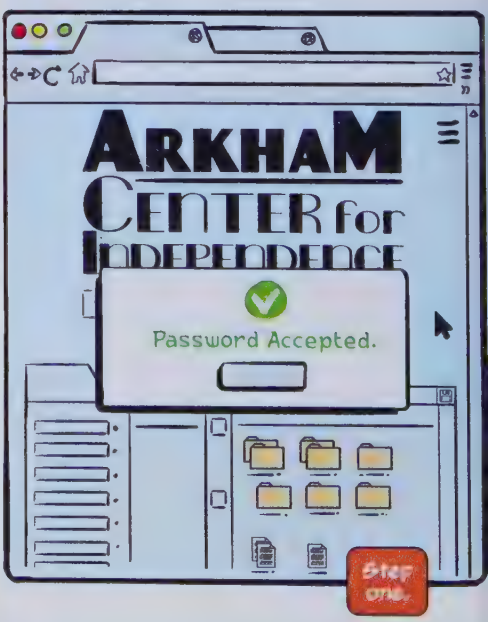
ARKHAM
CENTER for
INDEPENDENCE
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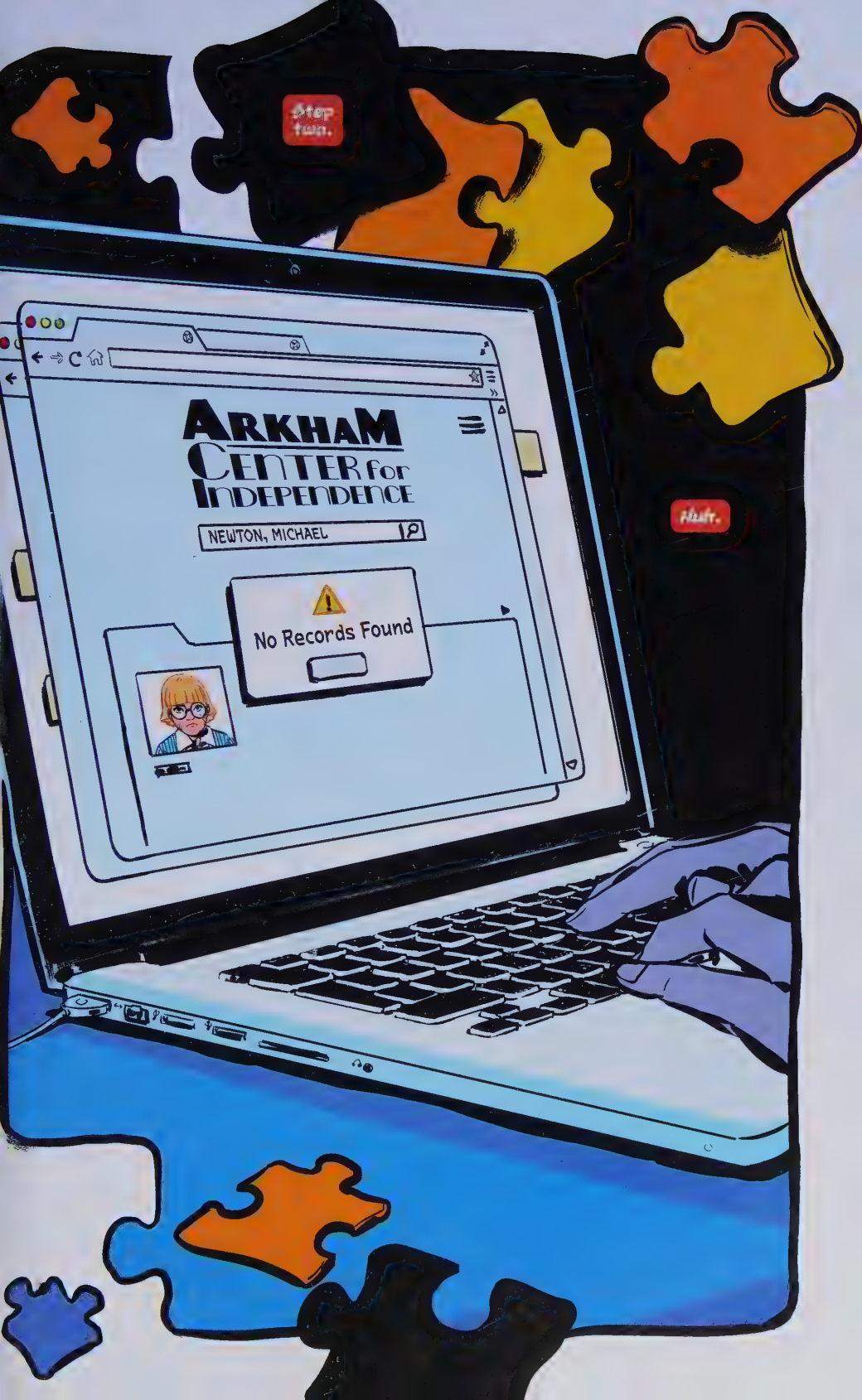
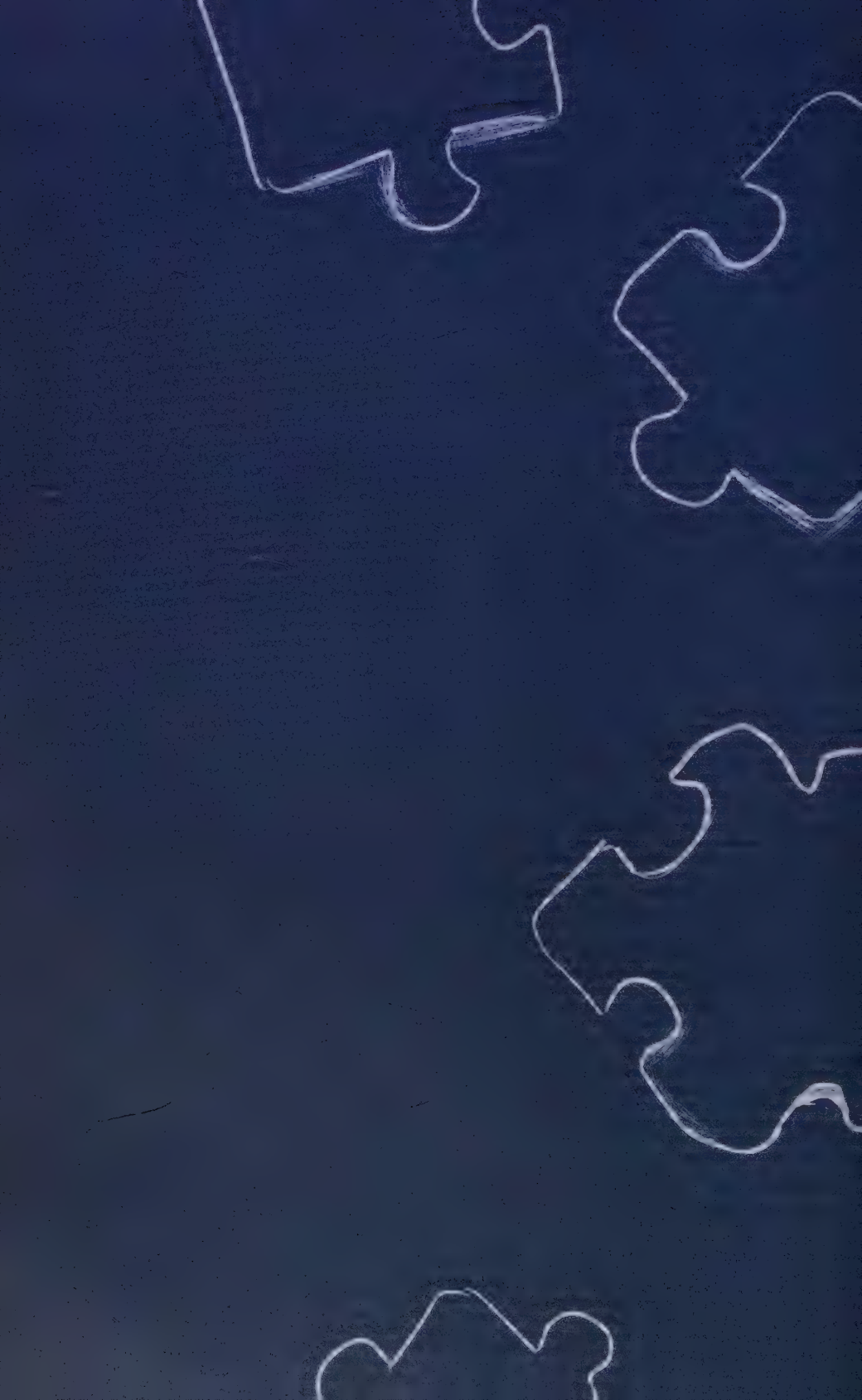

step two.
ARKHAM
CENTER for
INDEPENDENCE
NEWTON, MICHAEL
No Records Found
fault.



chapter: 4

Babs?

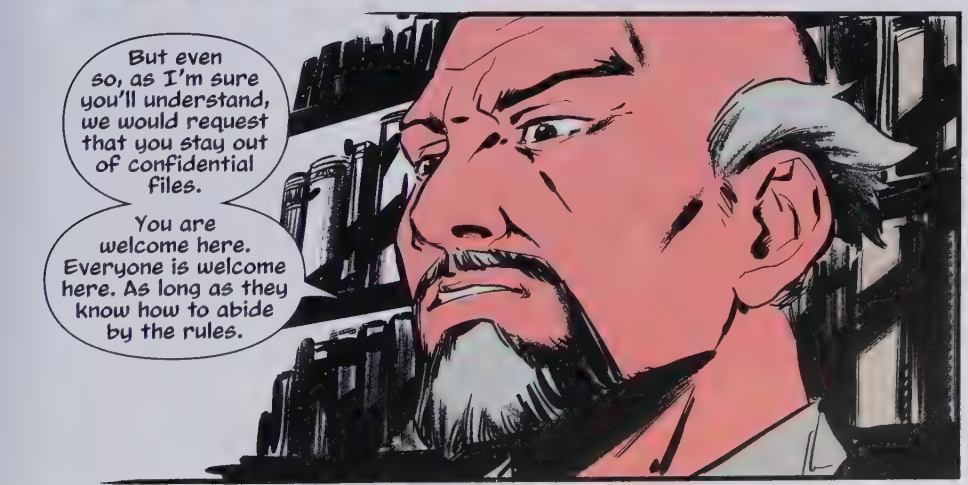
Dr. Maxwell came looking for you. He wants to see you in his office immediately.
Oh.

I don't have to ask why he wants to see me.

krock

Barbara. I'm sure you know why I asked you to come.
Is it because I don't trust anything that's going on here?

You should know, at this center, we favor patients bonding. Connection is a necessary part of the healing process, especially for lonely young girls such as yourself.
Ew.


But even so, as I'm sure you'll understand, we would request that you stay out of confidential files.
You are welcome here. Everyone is welcome here. As long as they know how to abide by the rules.

What about Michael?

Barbara, Michael was never at the center. He unfortunately passed away, too.
On an unconscious level, Jena knows this, but it's far easier for her to pretend he is still here.

Why would anyone let her believe that?

"Come on. I will show you."
This room is empty. It's always been. But Jena just didn't see.
She was *convinced* he was here.

She's grieving. As long as she's here, all we can do is help her slowly realize what's happening. All you can do is be there for her.

I'm slowly realizing something, too. Nothing good is happening here.
sob
sob

You're a hacker, Barbara Gordon. Were. *Are.* It's what you do. You may not be able to solve your own puzzle, but this house is a code and you *will* crack it.

This place is weird, Dad. I don't know what's going on here and I need help.
I know you're afraid, but you have help there. How are your therapies?

That's not what I mean.

I mean, patients go missing.
There's a girl here—Jena—she's a friend. Her brother has gone missing. Dr. Maxwell says she just imagined him because she's grieving, but I believe he was here. I have proof he was here.

What kind of proof?
A fragment of a doll.

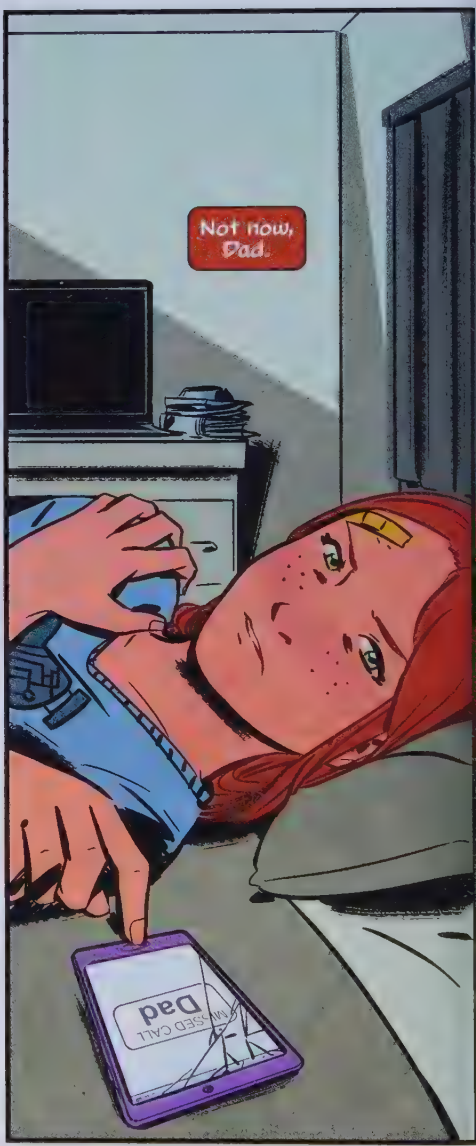
Sweetheart, that's not proof, that's wishful thinking.
This is not one of your puzzles, and now is not the time to go chasing ghosts. That's what got you into this situation in the first place.
Wait, I'm sorry, that came out wrong. But the point—
NO.
I was trying to help someone. I was trying to be who you want me to be. If you're going to blame me for getting shot—
I didn't mean—
I called to ask for help, Dad. But if you can't see beyond my therapies, I'd rather not talk for a while.
Sweetheart, I'm sorry. I'll give you space if you wa—
beep

"That's what got you into this situation in the first place." Why can't he just *trust* me?
AARGH!

I just want to help my friend. Is that too much to ask?
But I can't keep breaking into the files, because I'll definitely get caught again and sent home.

LATER.
C'mon, Babs, think.
I just need—
—to find—
—a better solution.
CRACK

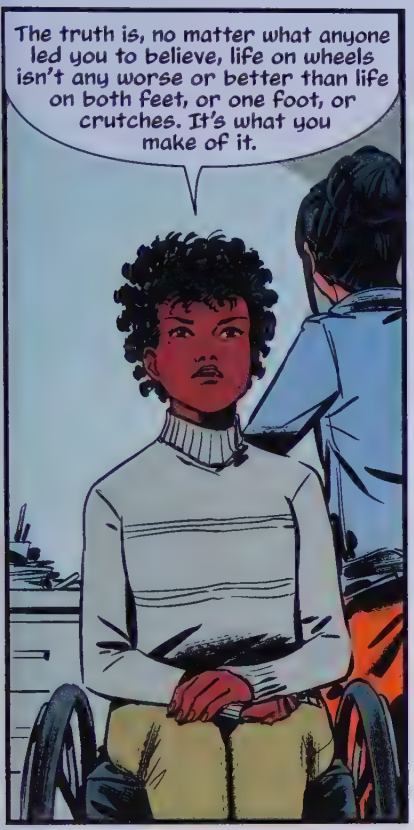
Day 22. Or day-I-guess-I-need-to-learn-my-limits.
Ow.
RESISTANCE IS FUTILE


Not now, Dad.
MISSED CALL
Dad

As for Benjamin...
I miss our rooftop hacks.
Have you beat any more challenges?
Nothing has changed between us. You know that, right?
I miss you.
I wish you would call.

She's awake!
Good. Finally.
Oh. Hi.

I don't think—
We've decided we need to talk to you.
We understand you're hurting, but pushing everyone away won't make life easier here.
RESISTANCE IS FUTILE
We *know* old friends don't always stay. Some of them leave and never come back. But you shouldn't isolate yourself because *they're* afraid.
We're here. We'll be there for you. We're all in this together.
RESISTANCE IS FUTILE
And c'mon, we know how to make life fun around here. You really should try wheelchair basketball.
RESISTANCE IS FUTILE
We can also go night swimming in the pool by the gym.


The truth is, no matter what anyone led you to believe, life on wheels isn't any worse or better than life on both feet, or one foot, or crutches. It's what you make of it.

I'm not sure I can.
You have to. You don't have a choice.

I can't do it alone.

Of course not. Nor should you have to.
You're going to spend time with us while you heal. Whether you like it or not. Now get dressed already.
AMETHYST
PRINCESS OF GEMWORLD

Wait.
Thank you.
YEEEAH!
WOOOO!
Okay, they may have had a point. This is magic.

While I was being ignorant, everyone was having a great time.
C'mon, Yeong!
Go Wonders!
WOOOO!
HOME
5:52
GUEST
16
ROBIN
22
9
Maybe I can still be exactly who I wanted to be. More.

I could even get used to not hiding in my room. Mostly anyway.
Hey, sportsball star! We're playing Switch!
Good. I come bearing food gifts.

Do you see? We're not that scary.
I wasn't scared of you, I was scared of...
Losing.

My best friend stopped talking to me after the accident.
Do you think he's scared, too?
Yes. Him. Dad. Benjamin and I were together the night I got shot. Not like anything, just on our rooftop. Hacking.

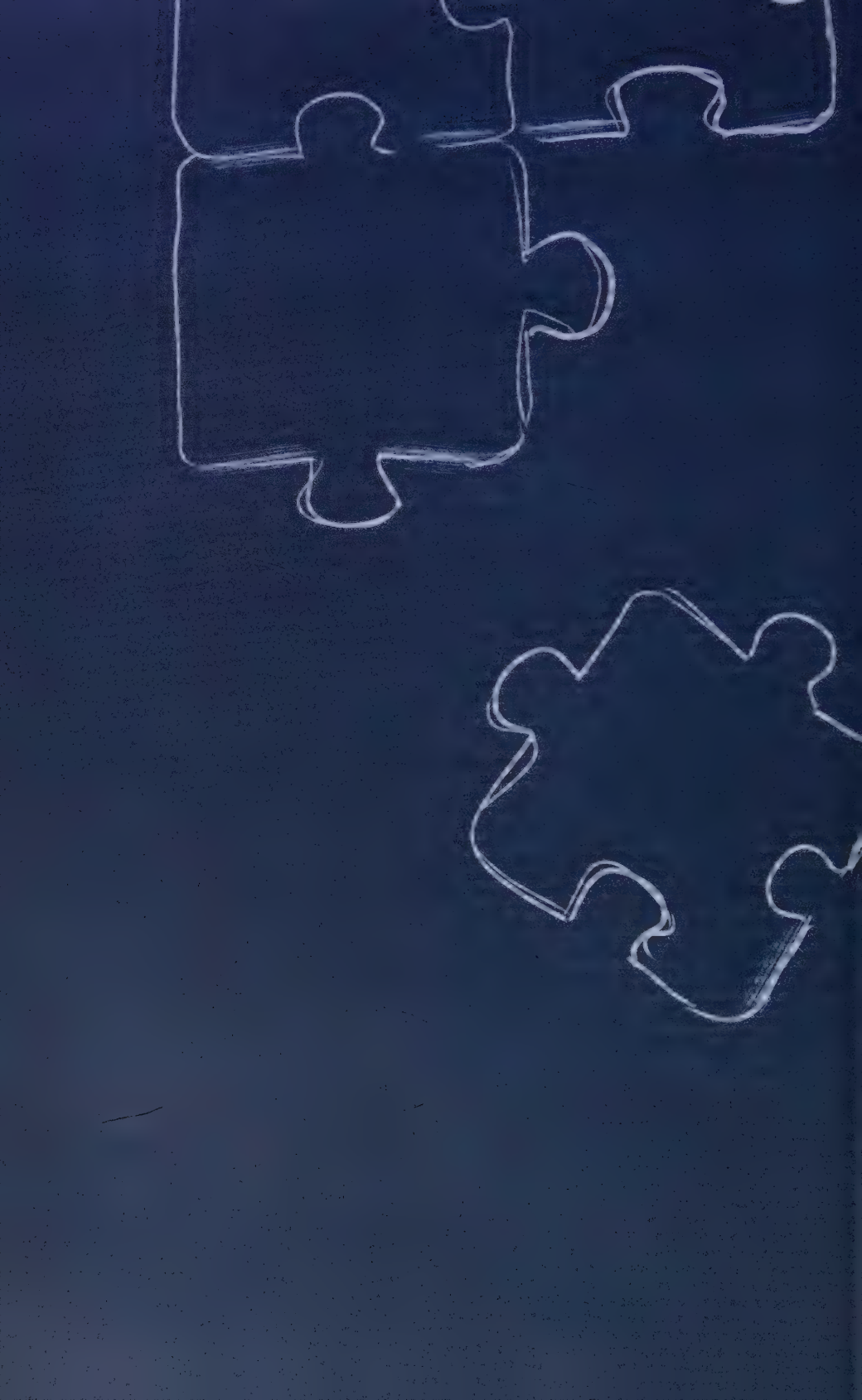
Everything looked so much more peaceful from up high.
A few hours later, I was on my way to the hospital and there was nothing left of our friendship.
And yes, maybe he is scared. But I shouldn't have to fix that.
I wasn't afraid of losing. I was afraid of already having lost.
Losing is only permanent if you stop trying.
I'm learning that now.
Last card.

Several hours, nine games, a handful of stories about losing friends and finding new ones, and three bags of marshmallows later.
I believe that's another win.

We take back everything we said today. You're way too good at this.
But, Yeong... losing is only permanent if you stop trying.

That's it. I'm out.
Probably wise. Breakfast is in four hours.
Late nights you'll regret are an essential part of the Arkham Center for Independence experience. Welcome to your first.
Here's to many more.

THAT NIGHT.

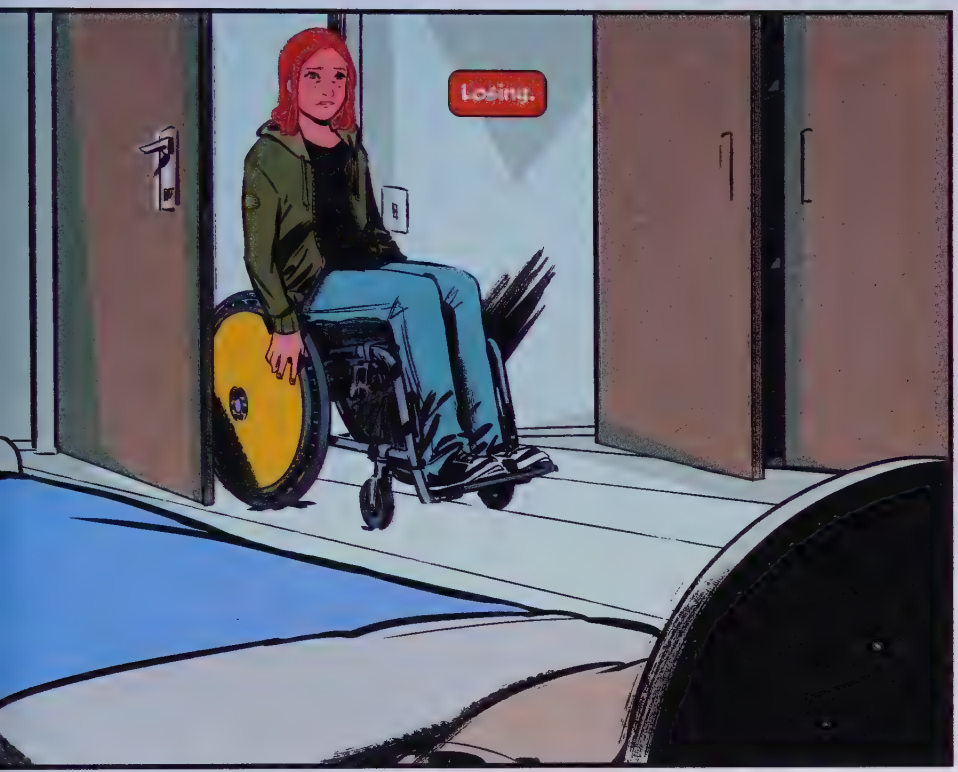


chapter: 5

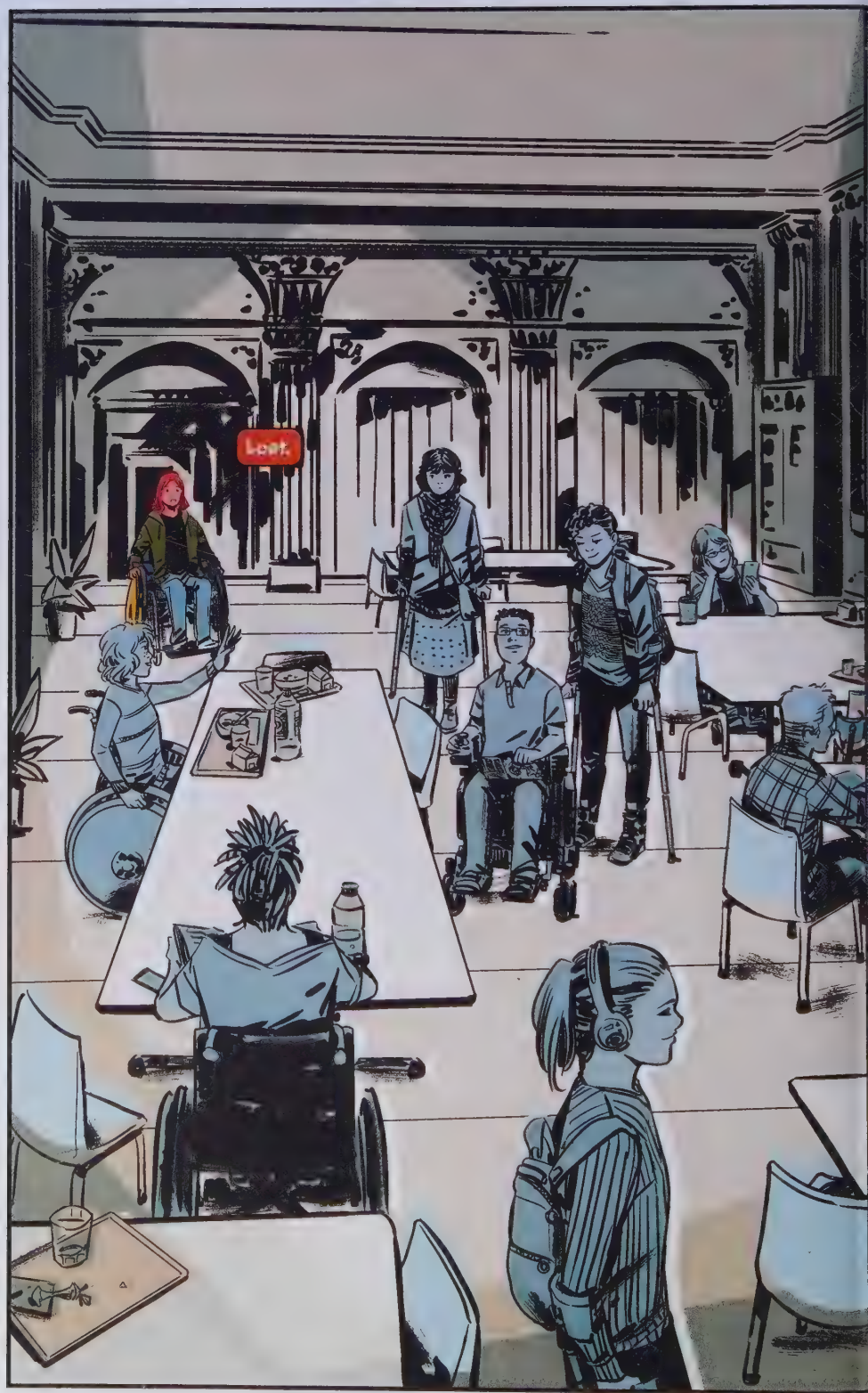
Day I-should-have-been-there-for-Jena.
=groan=
She did everything. She tried to be my friend first. I should have been here.
See you at lunch, Babs.
And she needs to know Michael was at the center. No matter what anyone tells her.

Jena?
Jena? I'm sorry I—
Oh no. No, no, no, no, no, no, no.

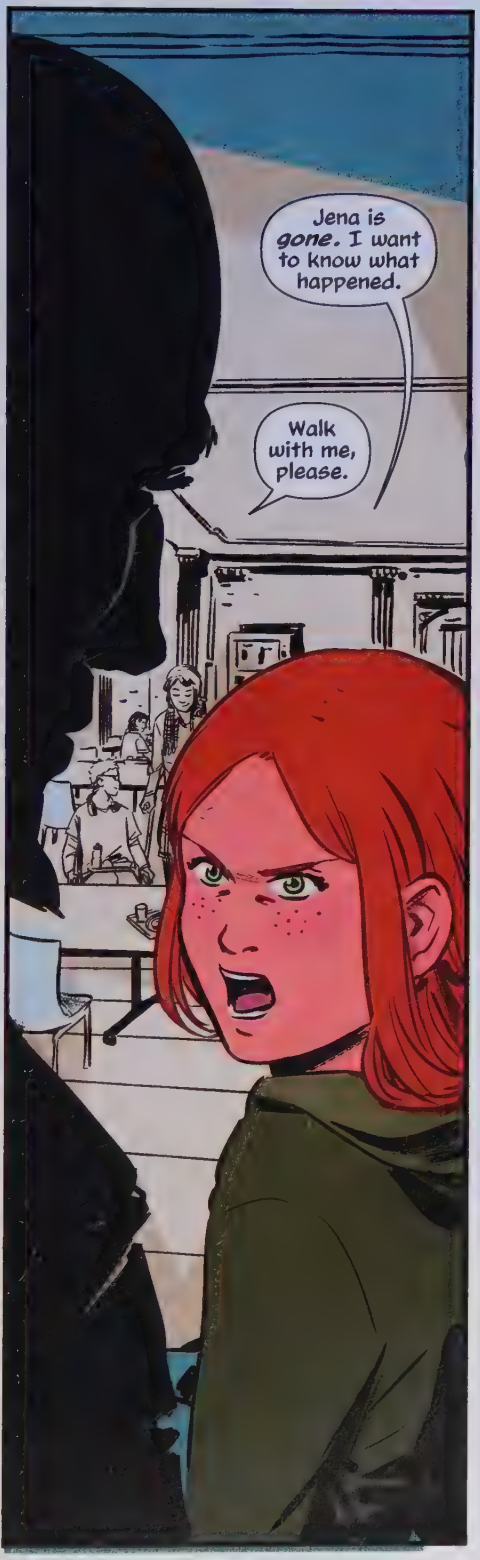
Jena!
This is not happening.
NO.


Losing.

Losing.
STAFF ONLY

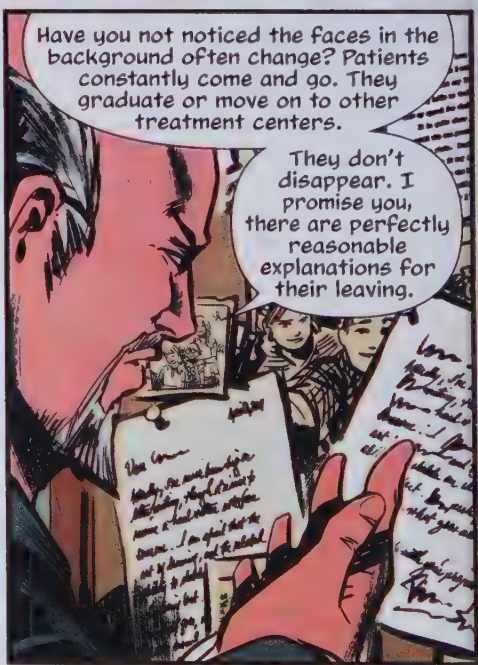

Leah.

What do you think you're doing, Ms. Gordon?
Ah, I see. I guess it's not Barbara anymore now.


Jena is gone. I want to know what happened.
Walk with me, please.

I believe we had a conversation about minding your own business not days ago, Ms. Gordon.
Jena is my friend. And she disappeared.

Ah yes, your father mentioned how much you like puzzle solving. But I must tell you, not everything in life is a puzzle.
Her room is *empty*.


Have you not noticed the faces in the background often change? Patients constantly come and go. They graduate or move on to other treatment centers.
They don't disappear. I promise you, there are perfectly reasonable explanations for their leaving.

In Jena's case, she was here by virtue of an anonymous donor. I cannot—will not—go into details but those sponsored places are unpredictable.
You're saying the money just dried up? So you kicked her out? Right when she needed help the most?
Some patients don't need therapy anymore. Some need more than the center can offer. We do *everything* we can, but we don't always succeed.
Some...well, sometimes there are financial reasons to consider, too. It's unfortunate, but it happens.
What happens to *fixing* us, then?
I'll try to find Jena's contact details for you, Barbara. If she wishes to stay in touch, I believe that would be good for both of you.
But remember, life at the center isn't permanent. Very little is.

Was that a warning or advice?
Sure, the faces in the background change.
Why do you keep hanging out with the Professor?
CRISIS

But none of those explanations make sense. Not *now*.
Babs?

Jena is gone. She was my friend and she just... disappeared.
I'm getting really tired of people disappearing.

Jena was the sleepwalker, right? I used to see her around.
According to Dr. Maxwell, her mysterious benefactor stopped paying, but she still needed therapy.
BOLT
I still needed to tell her about Michael.

There was a girl here, just before you came. Her name was Shanta. Same situation. She couldn't afford to stay any longer, and then she left the center shortly thereafter.
It's horrible, but it happens.
CRISIS

Jena wouldn't have left without saying good-bye.

Sorry, Dad. I'm not leaving this alone. I'm trusting my instincts.
If there were others like Jena, maybe they left clues.
Maybe...
Oh.
Behind this photo. One last story...

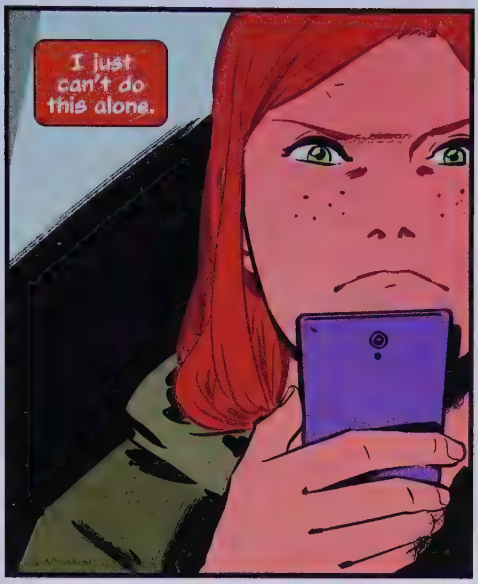
Once upon another time, the sun rose over a haunted mansion, and three girls, who had spent the night there, ran out the moment the door unlocked.
They had shared an experience that would bind the three of them together, forever.
I told you we could do it.

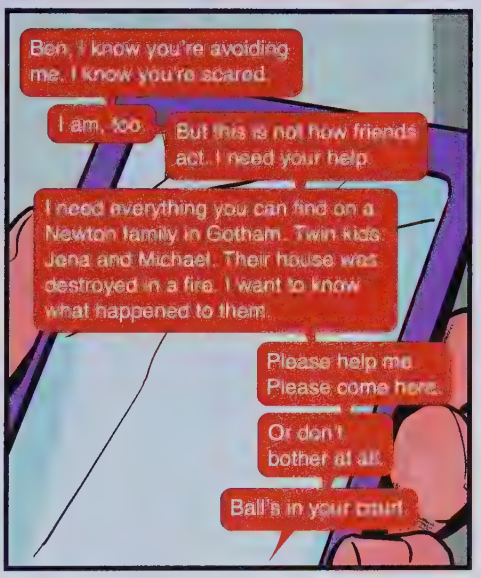
An hour previously they'd been huddled up in the mansion's large kitchen, atop a rotting rug, in front of an ice-cold fireplace. All three of them, holding on to one another tightly.
We're all together. We'll survive.
Before that, there was the drawing room, which by day looked out over the glowing hills but by night looked out over an inky black void. It'd been scarier than the room they thought haunted.
Creeeak
This is where the ghost lives.
Before that, the atelier. The haunted place. They walked out of that room hand in hand. Together.
Did you hear something?
It must've been the wind.

en they investigated the
elier, they found it was
imple, straightforward,
memorable. It was filled
th a silence deeper than
the ocean.
Everything that once was there had been erased, whether on purpose or by time.
Emptiness was all they saw when they walked into the atelier. All four of them.
This actually isn't scary!
Still, people disappeared here.
No one knew exactly what to expect when they came in.
C'mon, let's do this.
No one knew exactly what to expect when they found their way to the basement.
The stories said the first to have disappeared was the family's daughter. The heiress, who lived her life surrounded by art and memories. When she disappeared, her paintings did, too. Then the investigators. Then people who spent the night there.
But eventually, no one reported anyone missing anymore.

They would share an experience that would bind the four of them together, forever.

I'll find you, Jena. Promise.


I just can't do this alone.


Ben, I know you're avoiding me. I know you're scared.
I am, too.
But this is not how friends act. I need your help.
I need everything you can find on a Newton family in Gotham. Twin kids. Jena and Michael. Their house was destroyed in a fire. I want to know what happened to them.
Please help me. Please come here.
Or don't bother at all.
Ball's in your court.

Message sent

Day I-wish-I-could-tell-you-a-story.

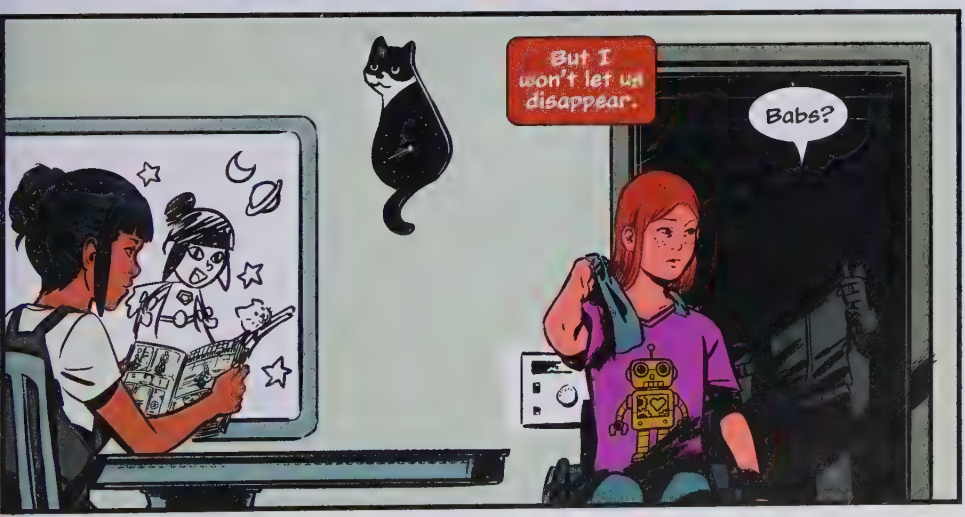
But there are only ghosts and secrets here. And I don't know how to make my stories *true*.

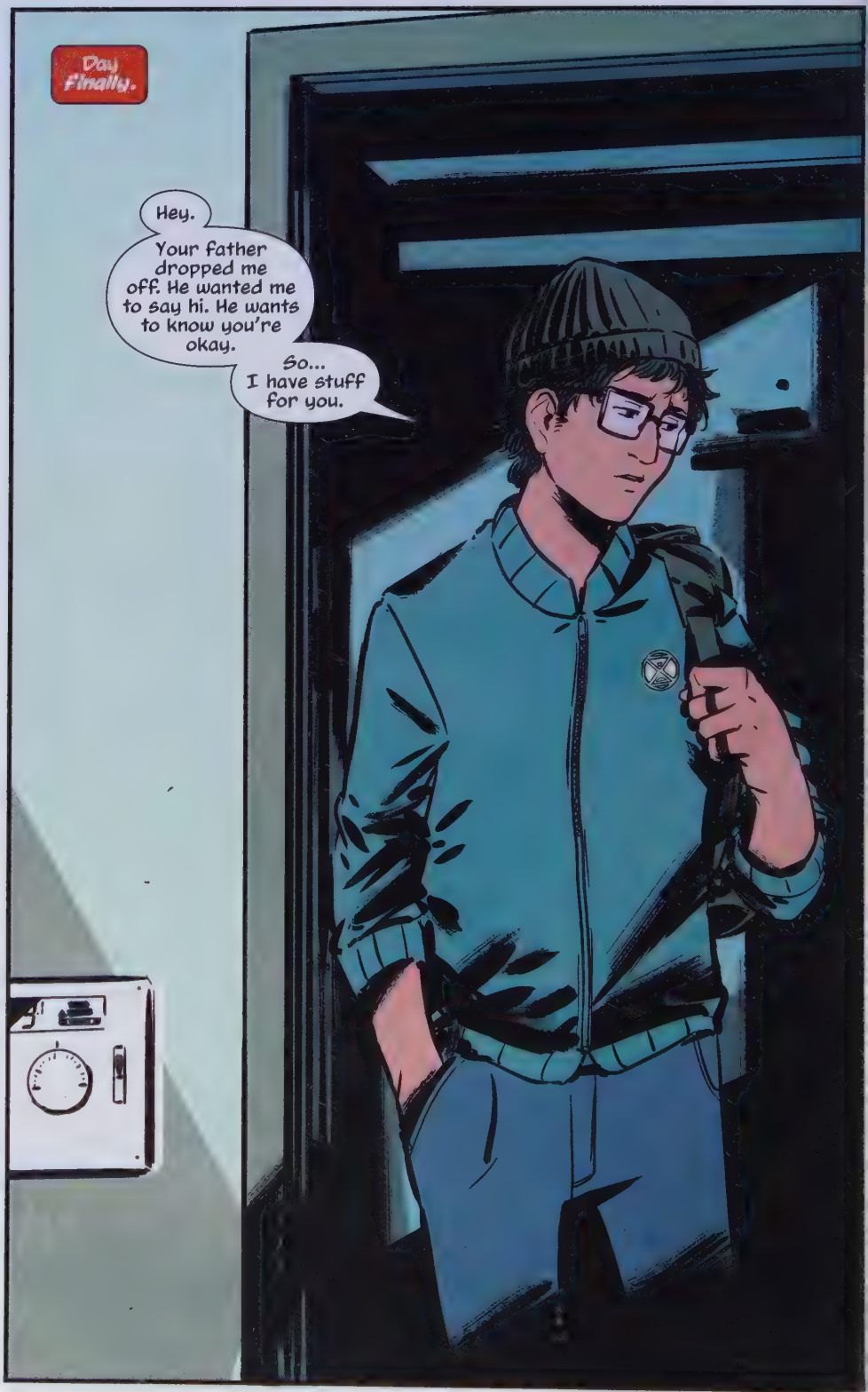
chapter: 6

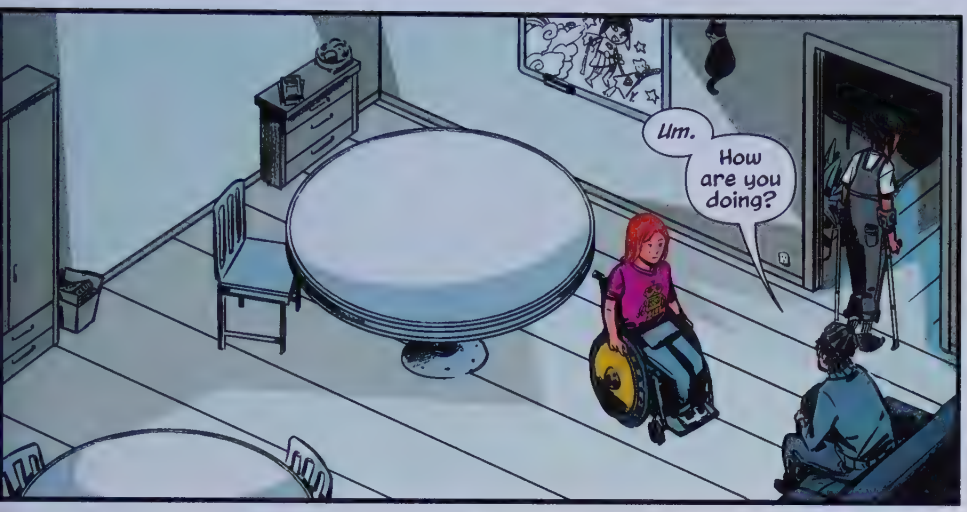
Day my friend is still gone.
You seem distracted.
Do you know that feeling when you've lost something? That nagging in the back of your head?
It's there when you are lost, too.
What have you lost?
My friends.
Myself.

These hallways are a maze. A haunted mansion in their own right.

And just like in the stories Jena told, the shadows gnaw at us. They try to swallow us.

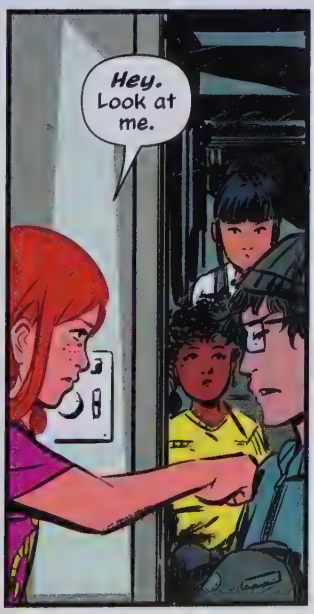

But I won't let us disappear.
Babs?


Day Finally.
Hey.
Your father dropped me off. He wanted me to say hi. He wants to know you're okay.
So... I have stuff for you.

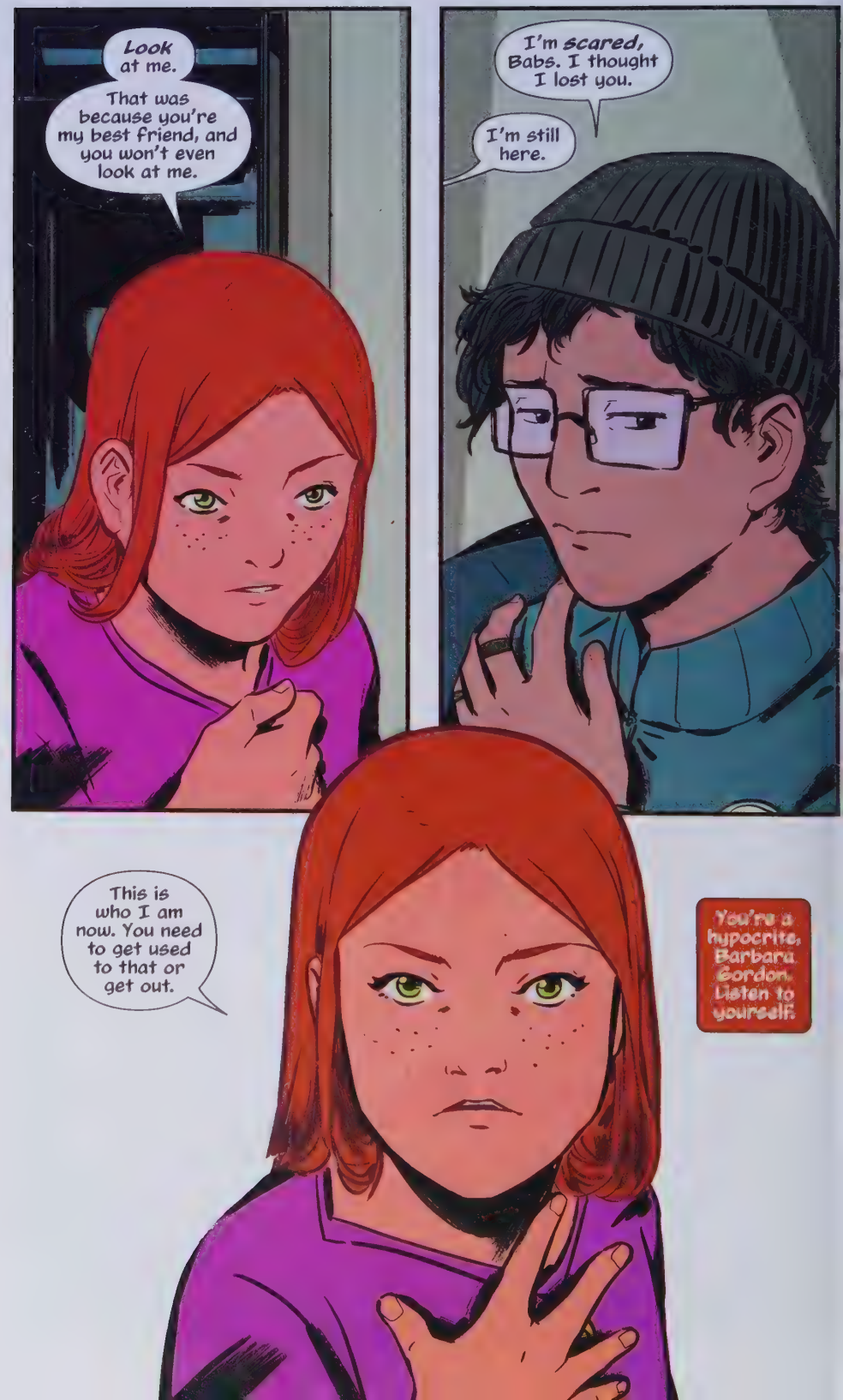

Um.
How are you doing?

I missed you.
I'm getting the hang of *this*.
Okay, cool.

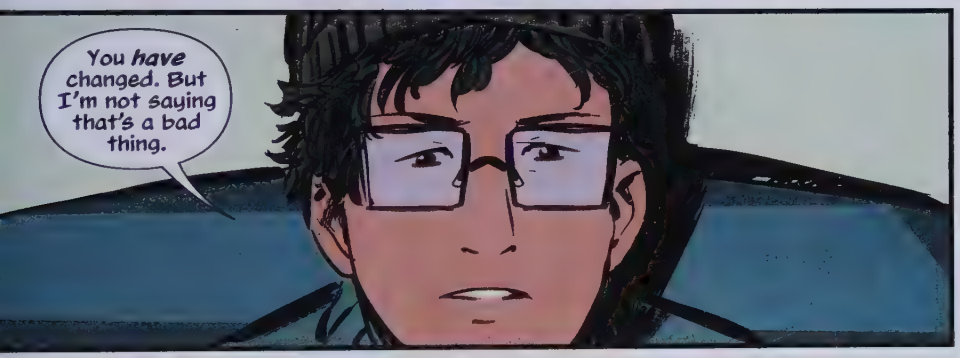
I still miss you.


Hey. Look at me.

Ow. What's *that* for? And when did you get so *strong*?

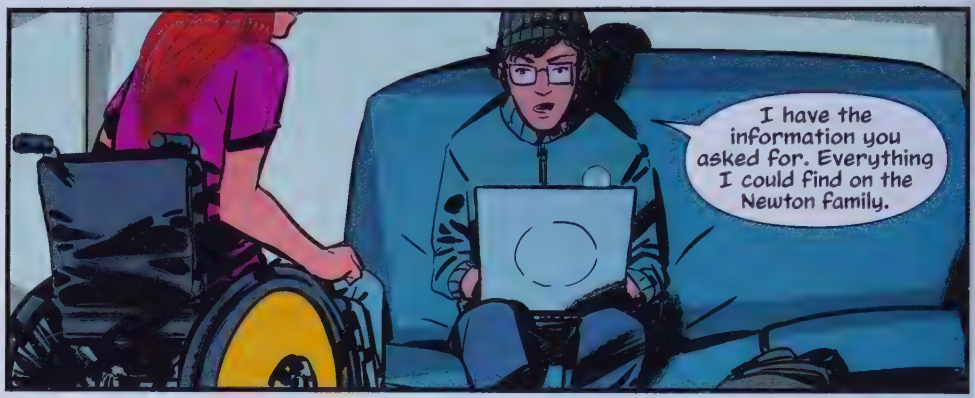

Look at me.
That was because you're my best friend, and you won't even look at me.
I'm scared, Babs. I thought I lost you.
I'm still here.
This is who I am now. You need to get used to that or get out.
You're a hypocrite, Barbara Gordon. Listen to yourself!

I know, it's just...
Don't say I have changed.

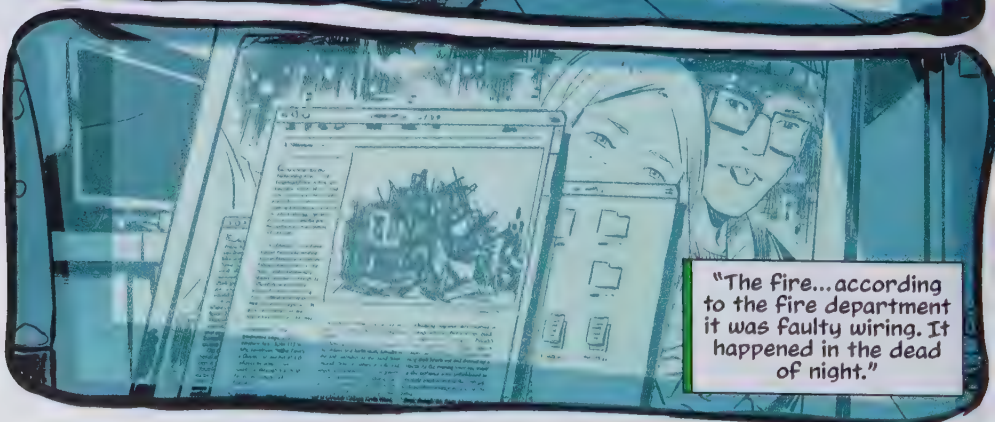

You *have* changed. But I'm not saying that's a bad thing.

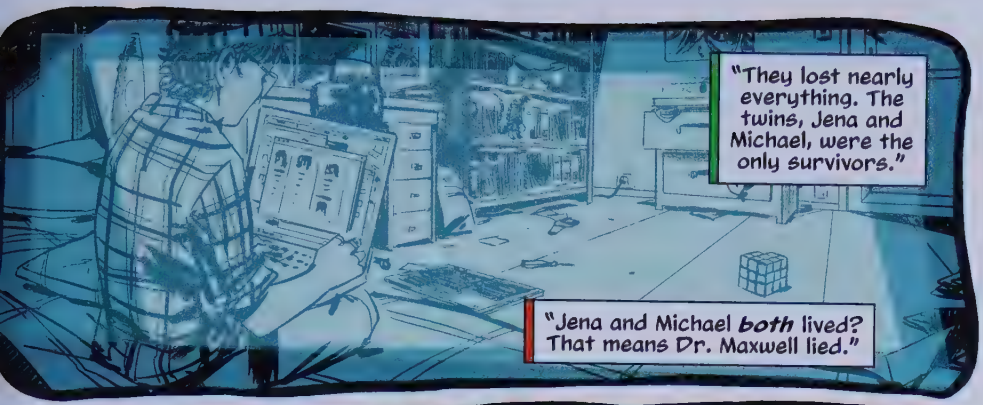
I'm scared to think of it as a good thing.

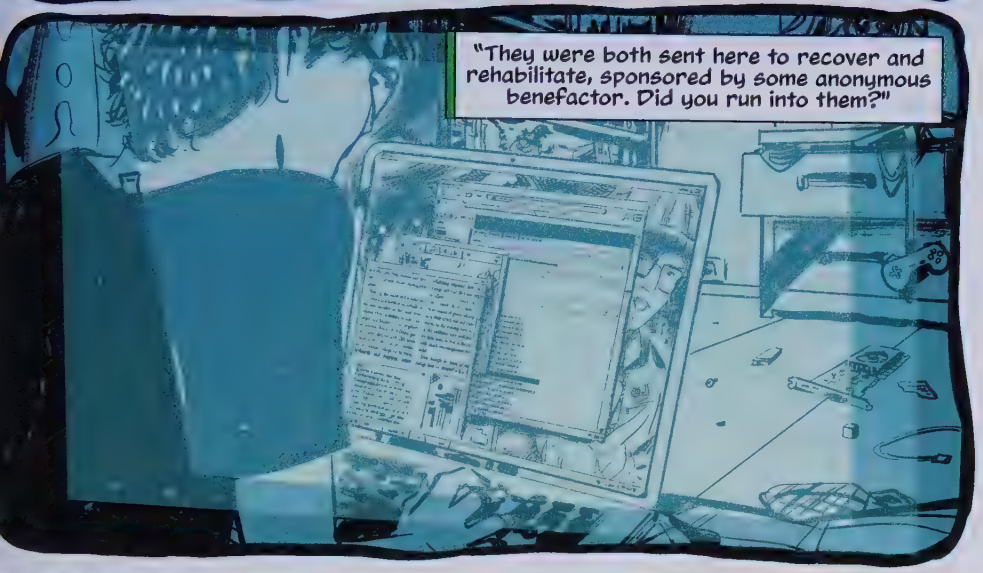
Anyway, I'm here for a different reason.

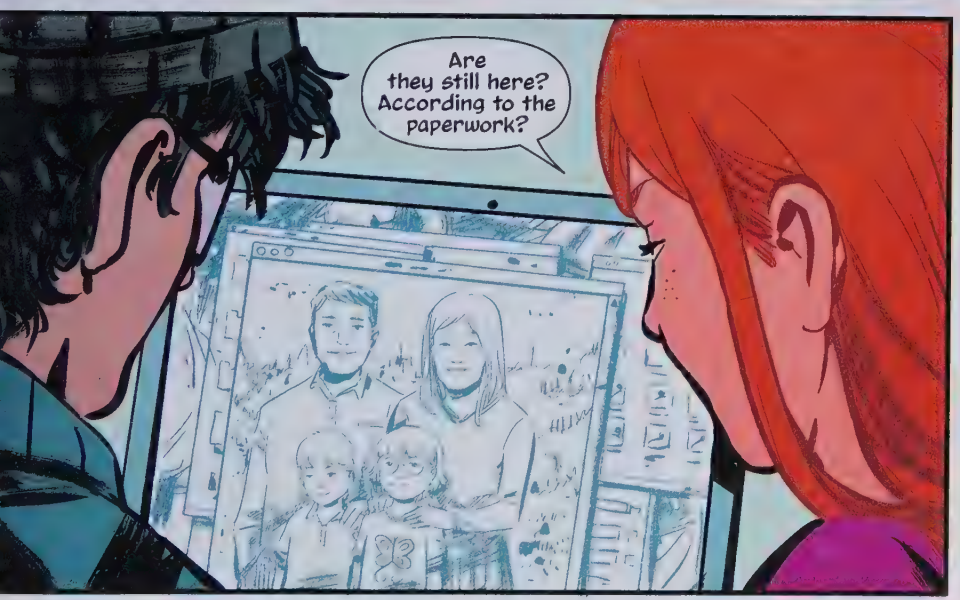

I have the information you asked for. Everything I could find on the Newton family.

"I don't know why you want to know—and you don't have to *tell* me—but what happened to the family was rotten luck.
BATMAN


"The fire...according to the fire department it was faulty wiring. It happened in the dead of night."


"They lost nearly everything. The twins, Jena and Michael, were the only survivors."
"Jena and Michael *both* lived? That means Dr. Maxwell lied."


"They were both sent here to recover and rehabilitate, sponsored by some anonymous benefactor. Did you run into them?"


Are they still here? According to the paperwork?

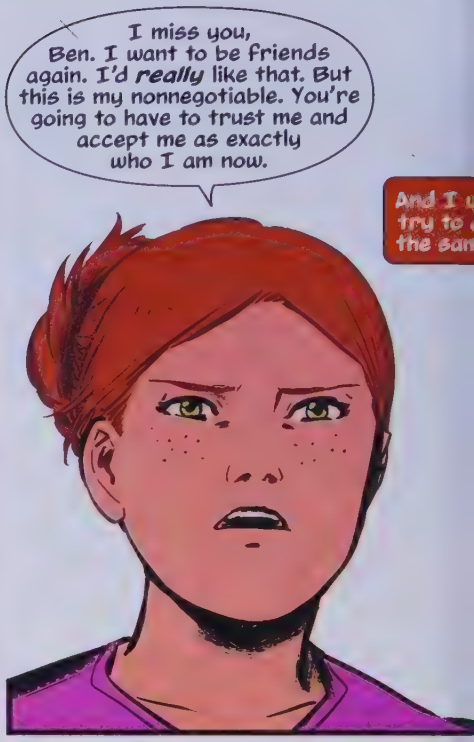
Why?
They're gone. Both of them.
What do you mean, gone?
They've disappeared.
But... that's not possible.
Are you calling me a liar?

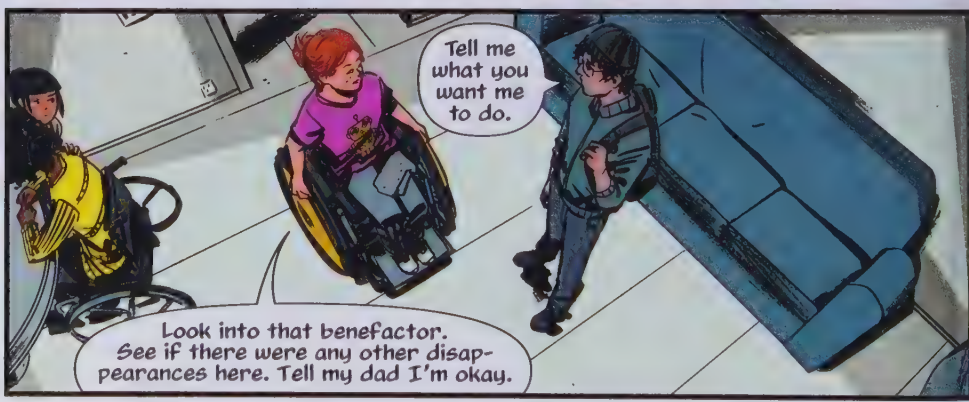
I would never. I'm just saying there's no digital trail. There's nothing to indicate they've left the center.
I hacked into the system here, but there is nothing to indicate they even *were* at the center in the first place.
There's no trail at all. Do you know who the mysterious benefactor is?
I got caught, so I couldn't keep digging.
You got caught?
Focus, Ben.
Do you... do you want me to keep looking?

Please. Together?
I need to be a part of this. I'll hack into the systems again, too. The staff computers this time, not the network.
Because look what happened last time you couldn't give up, Barbara Gordon.

Are you sure that's sensible?
Because look what happened last time I couldn't give up?
That's not what I said, but that's fair.
I'm sorry for not being here. I was wrong. And I will help you. Just...
I don't know what you're playing with. No one has caught you in a long time. I want you to be safe. I *need* you to be safe.

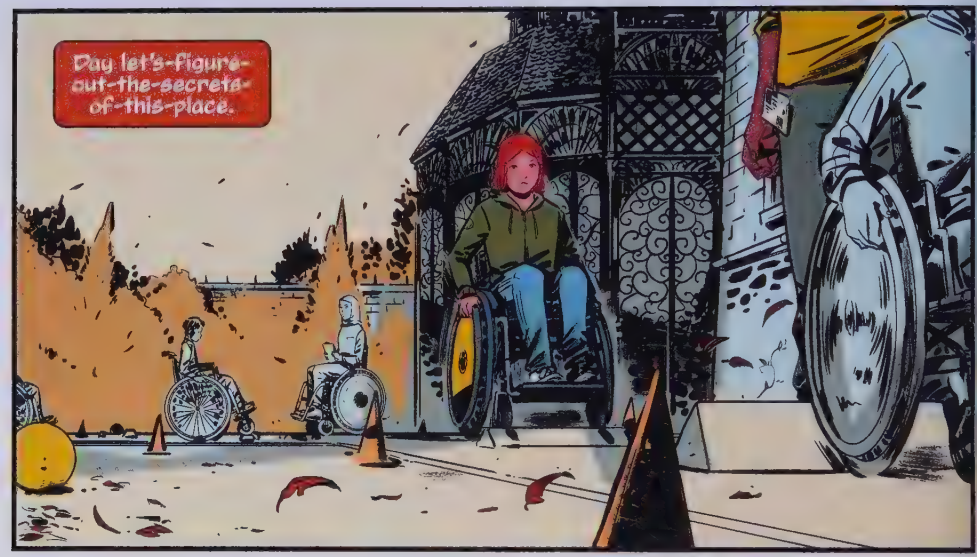
I want to be safe, too, but...
Some things are more important than safety.


I miss you, Ben. I want to be friends again. I'd really like that. But this is my nonnegotiable. You're going to have to trust me and accept me as exactly who I am now.
And I


Tell me what you want me to do.
Look into that benefactor. See if there were any other disappearances here. Tell my dad I'm okay.

And when I text you...please just reply? There are too many ghosts here already.
I will, I promise.

Hey. I missed you.
Are you okay?
That looked good, maybe? Uncomfortable?
Both?
I'm glad you got the chance to reconnect.
I asked him to look into Jena's family for me. I'm glad he came through.
Babs, people leave the center. It's normal. You have to let it go. I know you're worried but—
I missed you, too.
It's less scary to try to solve this puzzle when I'm with friends.

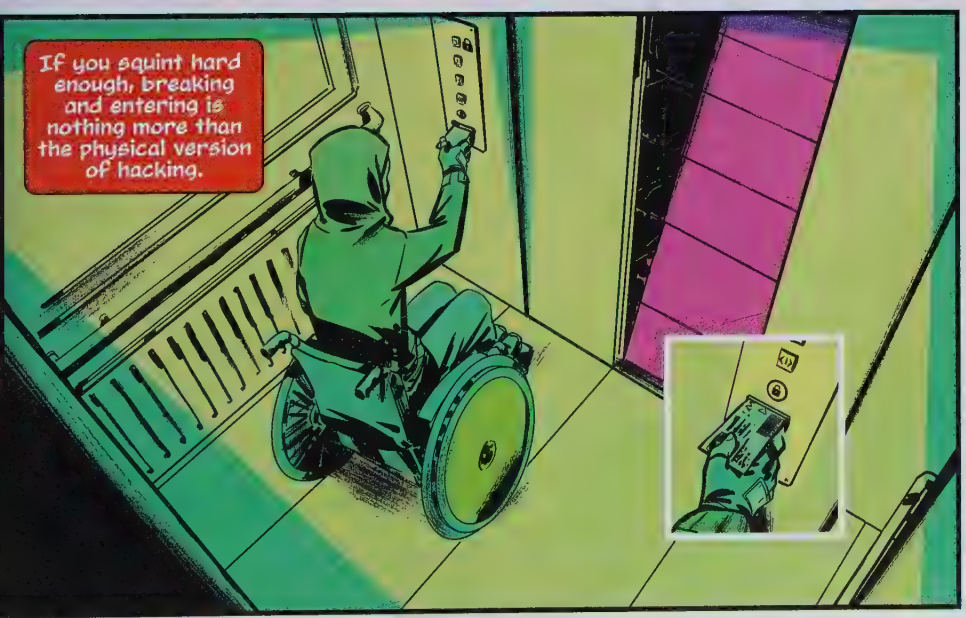

Dag. let's-figure-out-the-secrets-of-this-place.

To get into the center's local network, I need to make it to the staff computers. That won't trace it back to me.

First step: getting the password.
Oh! Babs! Are you okay?

It's amazing what people don't notice because they don't have the right perspective.

Next step: finding the right door.


If you squint hard enough, breaking and entering is nothing more than the physical version of hacking.

Final step: sneaking in. Quietly, very quietly.
RATTLE

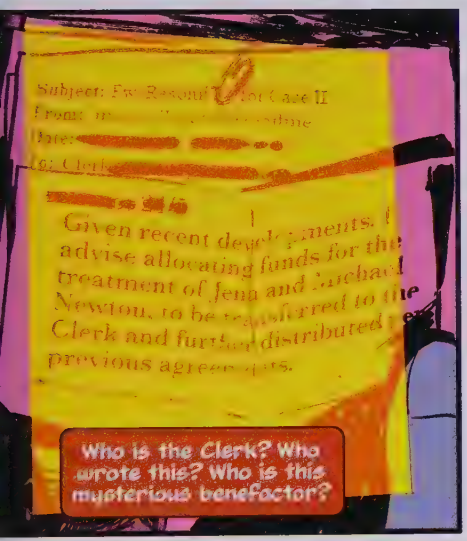
Creeeak

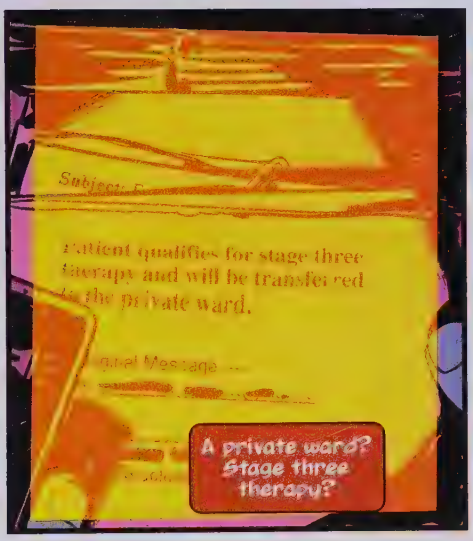
clic
Bingo.
I think.

This system must be as old as the mansion. How does the A.C.I. work like this?
Ma-No
[PATIENTS]

Let's see...
Give me all your secrets.
Newspaper clippings. Intake forms. Pictures. I know all of this already.

Why don't these people have a digital archive like sensible humans?
Wait, what's this...


Who is the Clerk? Who wrote this? Who is this mysterious benefactor?

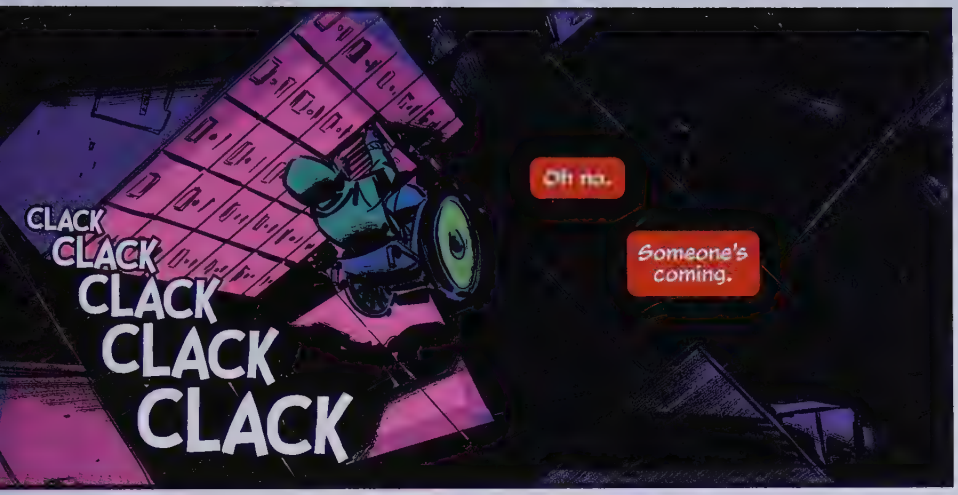

A private ward? Stage three therapy?

Does that mean they're still here? That would explain why there's no digital trail out of the center.
Maybe Benjamin can trace these addresses, uncover some more details.

Maxwell?

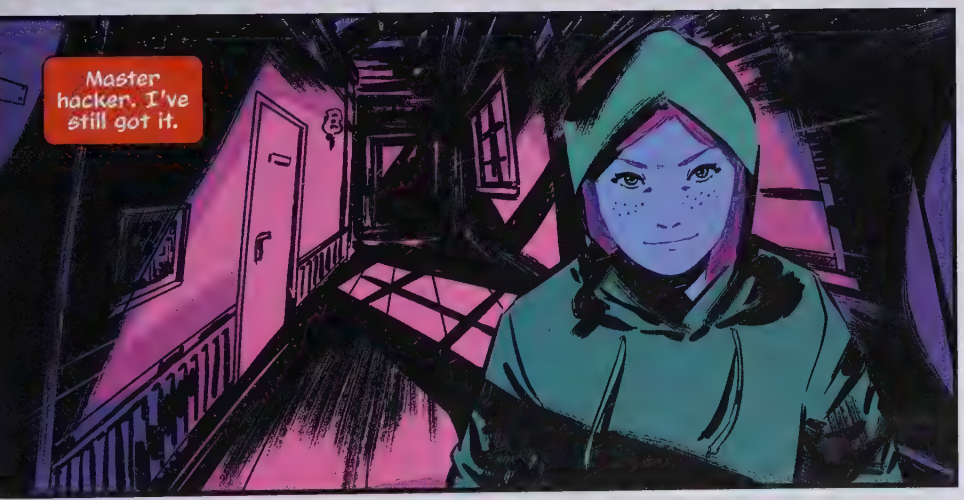
The Professor had a daughter?

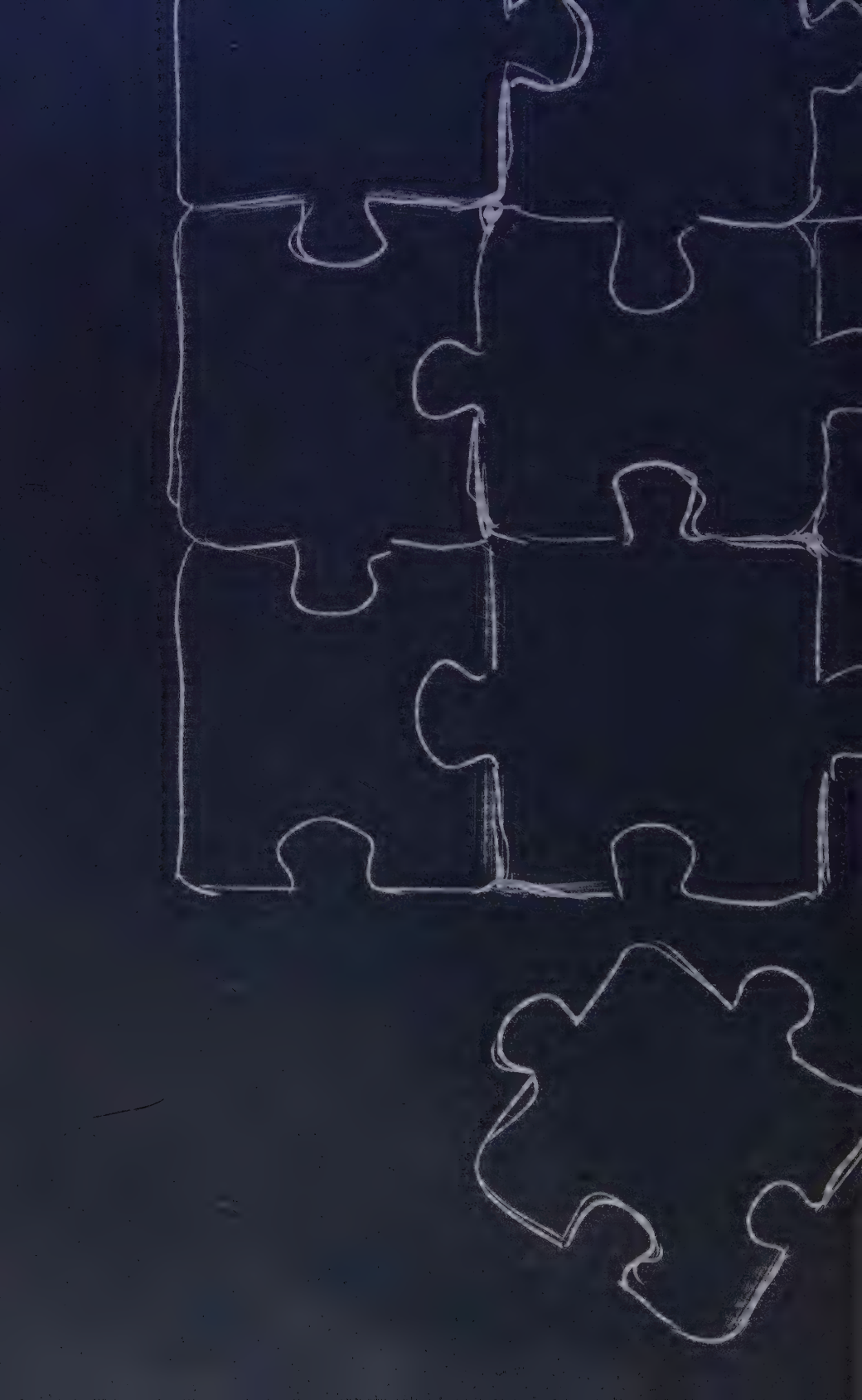
This place has so many gho—
CLACK
CLACK
CLACK


CLACK
CLACK
CLACK
CLACK
CLACK
Oh no.
Someone's coming.

Thought... saw a light...
C'mon. Believe this door is locked.
CLACK
CLACK
CLACK
CLACK

No way I'm going to get caught twice.
CLACK
CLACK
CLACK

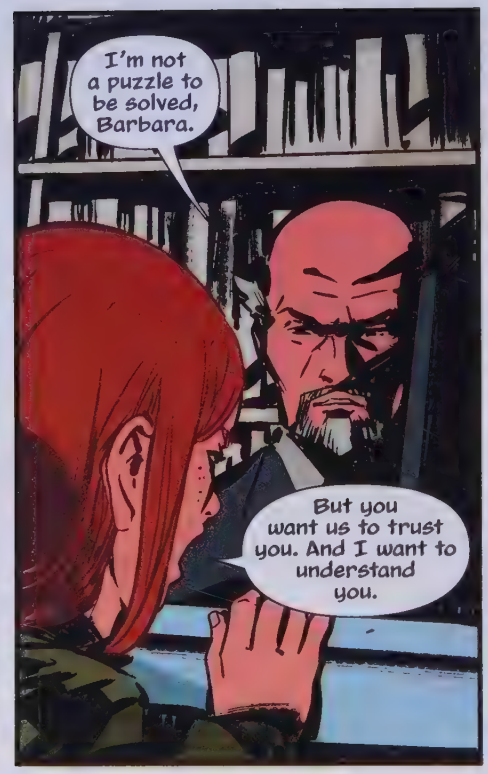

Master hacker. I've still got it.



chapter: 7

One too-short night later.
Are you okay? You look exhausted.
We should do something fun tonight. Take your mind off things.
I can't—I'm fine. I just... didn't sleep much.
We're here for you, you know that, right?
I couldn't stop thinking
I need to figure out where that private ward is, what happened to Jena and Michael, and what happened to Clara. How is she connected to all of this?
Baaaaaaaabs
Those are just portraits, Babs. They can't actually see you.
They're not talking to you either.
Baaaaaaaabs
Barbara.
"Barbara?"
MAD WORLD

Barbara?
You've had some time to settle in here. You know your therapists. You've made friends. Tell me about your progress.
I guess I'm starting to find my way around here.
So you have. And what has your stay so far taught you?
It's given me a lot of questions.
If this is about your friend again, I can assure you there is nothing more to disc—
It's not that. It's just that you know everything about me, and I know nothing about you.
PROGRESS NOTES

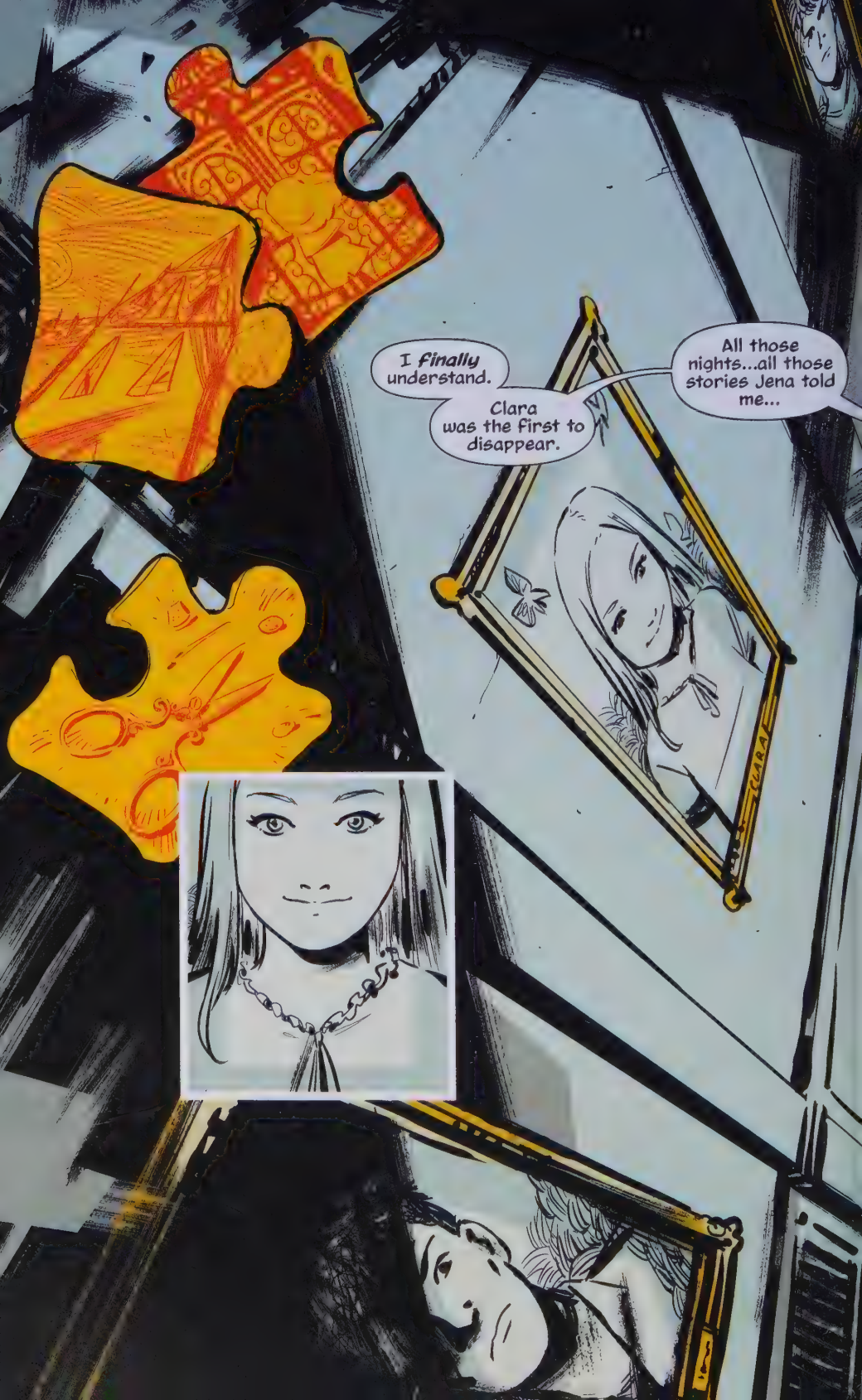

I'm not a puzzle to be solved, Barbara.
But you want us to trust you. And I want to understand you.

What do you want to know?
Do you have children?

Ah. If you're asking, I believe you already know the answer. Did you notice the portrait outside?

Clara.
Yes. Clara.
A whirlwind of joy and curiosity, much like her mother.
She planned to be a biologist. She used to carry flowers and butterflies inside and turn our home into her own private greenhouse.
A conservatory?

"She was born with a rare neurological disorder, and as she grew older, she grew weaker, until she could not stand independently or breathe independently.
"She was eleven when she died.
"I built this center in her honor. If she'd had something like this...if she'd had the help she deserved...I wasn't able to cure her—to *fix* her. But how could I stop trying?
"Still, her memory... I'm sure you understand, Ms. Gordon, why I choose not to speak of her."
"I do.
"I understand."


I *finally* understand.
Clara was the first to disappear.
All those nights...all those stories Jena told me...
CLARA

They weren't just stories.
They were all real in some sort of way.
This is where the ghosts live.
And now I know, and I *will* find them.

Game on.
Ben, I need you to look at this. I need you to look into the private ward. I need you to look into Clara Maxwell and Dr. Maxwell's research following his daughter's death. I need to know what stage three therapy is.

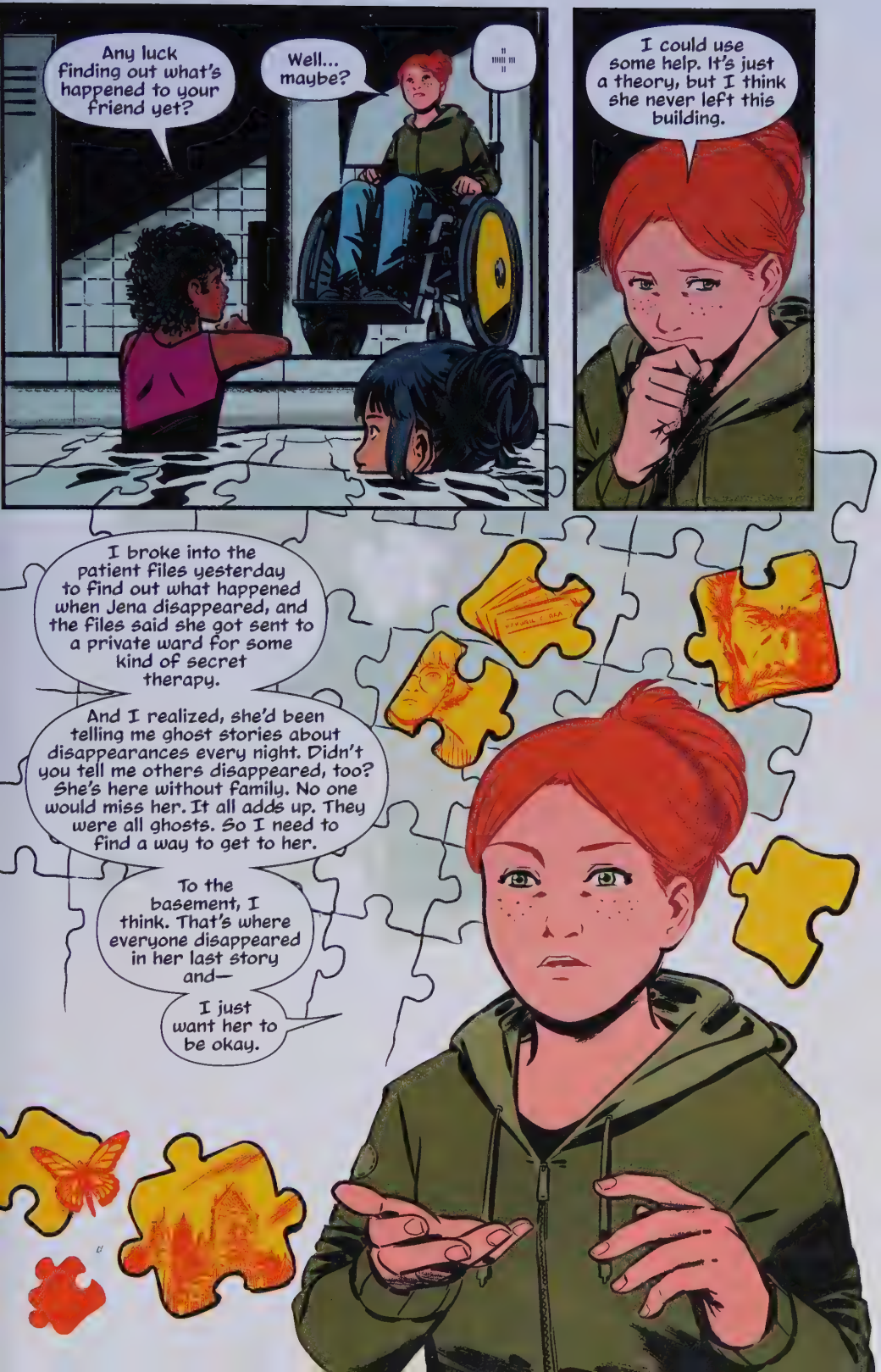
What will you do?
38%
I'm going to find what haunts this place.

76%
Connection lost
Tap to retry

C'mon, send.
Benjamin?
Message failed to deliver.
Baaaaaaaabs

So now my phone is haunted, too?
Baaaaaaaabs
CRASH
Don't worry, I'll be careful.
I'm not going ghost hunting alone.
Message failed to deliver.
SPLASH

You know I can hear you from miles away. This is how ghost stories start.
Quite literally.
Baaaaaaaabs


Any luck finding out what's happened to your friend yet?
Well... maybe?
I could use some help. It's just a theory, but I think she never left this building.
I broke into the patient files yesterday to find out what happened when Jena disappeared, and the files said she got sent to a private ward for some kind of secret therapy.
And I realized, she'd been telling me ghost stories about disappearances every night. Didn't you tell me others disappeared, too? She's here without family. No one would miss her. It all adds up. They were all ghosts. So I need to find a way to get to her.
To the basement, I think. That's where everyone disappeared in her last story and—
I just want her to be okay.

Okay.
Okay?
What do you want us to do?

I...oh. I think we need to start with the painting of Clara. It was in one of Jena's stories, too, and I think it all started with her. I think—
I didn't think you'd *help!*

Of course we will. We're not going to let you lose again.
Just let us get dressed. And tell us who Clara is.

So Dr. Maxwell told me he couldn't stop trying to cure Clara. What if he's still trying? Experimenting on his patients? Attempting to *fix* the children who come through here?
Like lost girls and shadows. Fed to the darkness.
If all of that is true, if we find Jena's clues, then—
What do you want to do?
I want to stop him.
Newton, Jena

What if the painting is just a painting?
I can always, um, hack into Dr. Maxwell's office.

That sounds like a terrible idea.
I don't think it'll be necessary. Jena showed me this for a reason.

So do you think there's a secret passage or something?

I didn't, but—
CLICK
=sob=
Baaaaaaaaab=
Well, that's not ominous at all.

Couldn't you think of another way to hang out and have fun?
Why do buildings like these never have proper ramps? Or elevators?
C'mon, we're doing this, right? Onward!
Well. Backward.
You're terrible.
I know.
They didn't teach me that in Skills Training.
Can you make your way down the stairs? I'll take care of your chair.
I think so.

Is this it? Storage?
Hidden away behind a secret door? No way.
We have to keep going.

It's like a maze.
Or a puzzle.

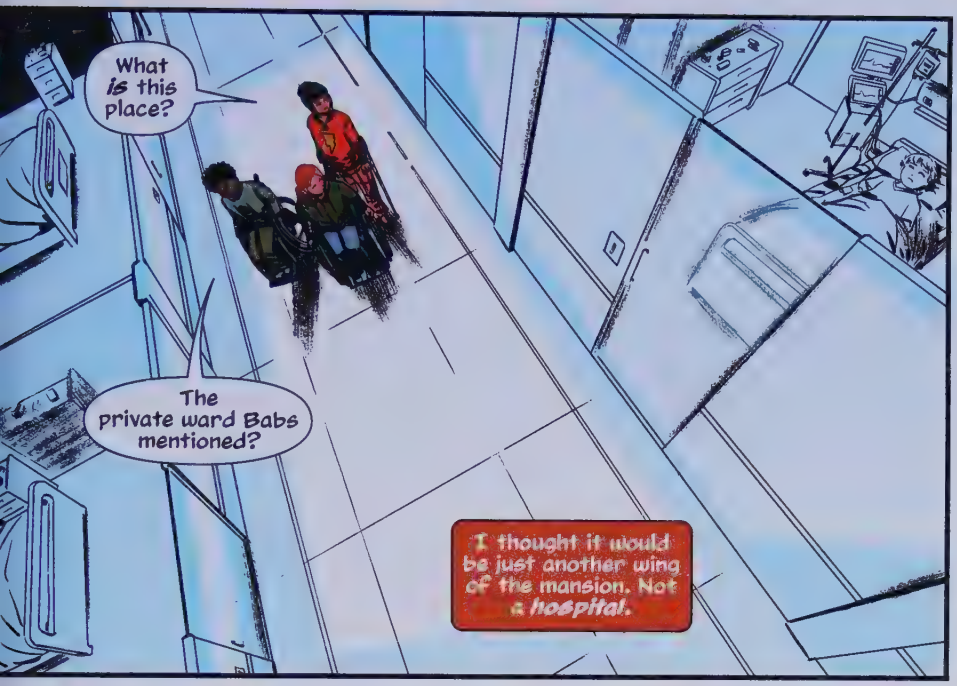
There it is. This has to be it.
SSSSSSSSSh

How many different options are there?
Only a thousand.
Only a thousand? Oh, well, all right, then.
If my phone worked...

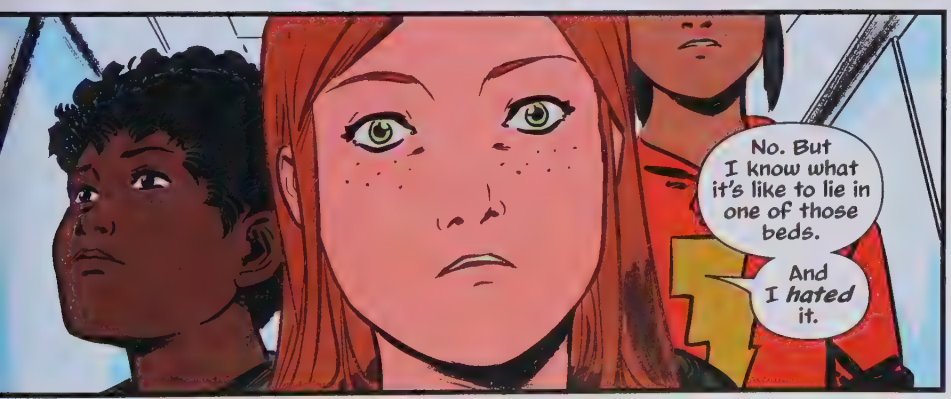
If Jena gave you all this information, she must've given you a way in, too.
Not in that story. But... maybe...

Gather two buttons for eyes...
And seven yards of thread...
A dress made of three pieces...
We'll put them all to bed.
CLICK
I *hate* nursery rhymes.

Wow.
Oh no.

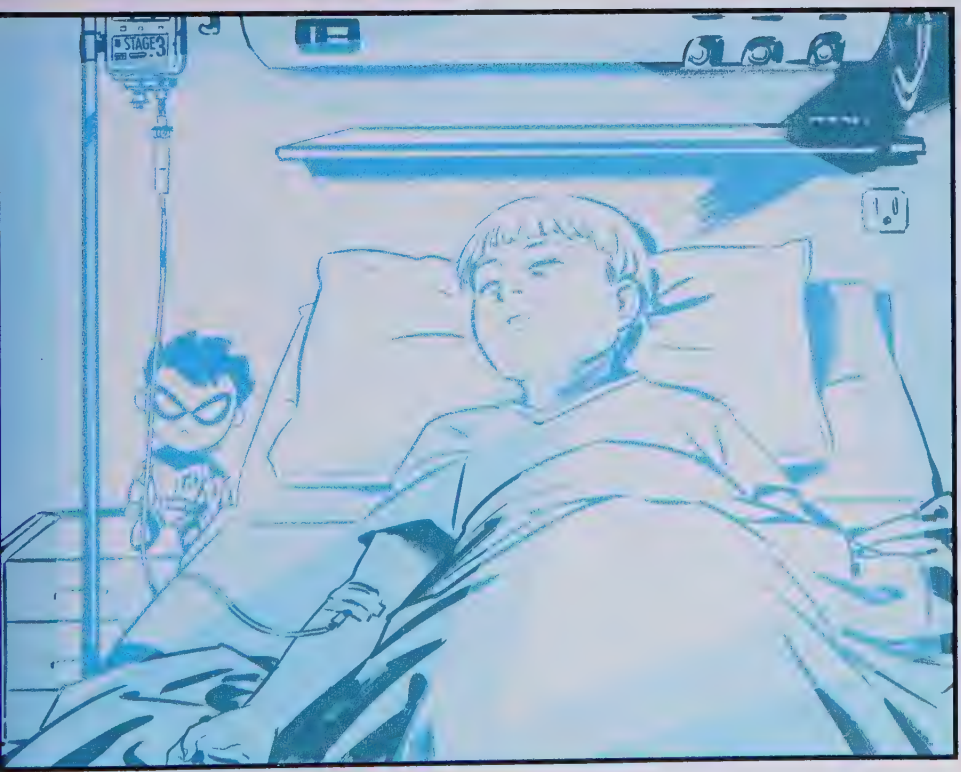

What is this place?
The private ward Babs mentioned?
I thought it would be just another wing of the mansion. Not a hospital.

This is a nightmare.
You don't happen to know what this experimental therapy is?
beep

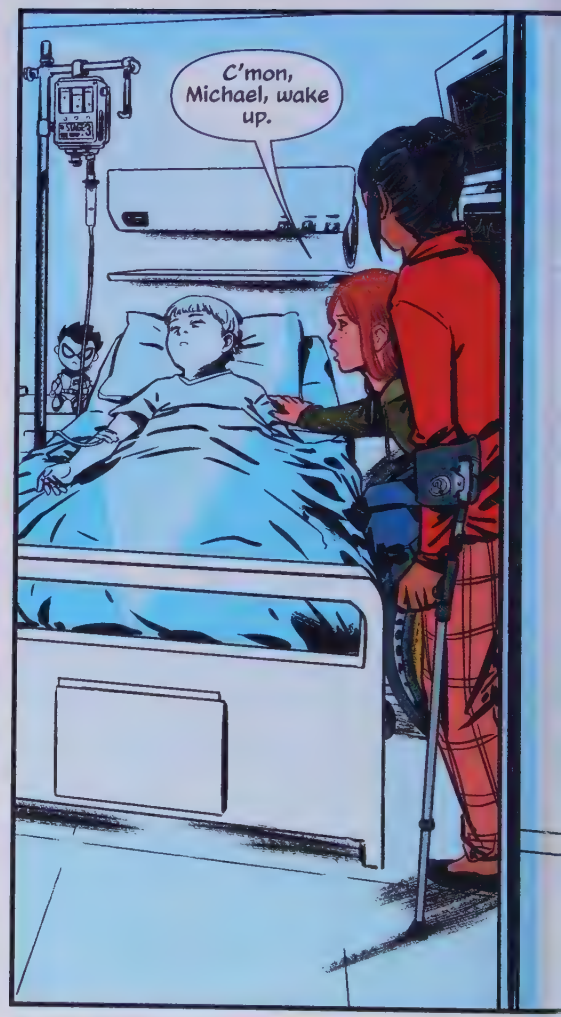

No. But I know what it's like to lie in one of those beds.
And I hated it.

This is where the ghosts live.
And I don't know how to stop being afraid.
"Look what happened last time you couldn't give up."
Babs? C'mon. Focus.
Keep breathing.
We're here for you. We're here *with* you. Just breathe.

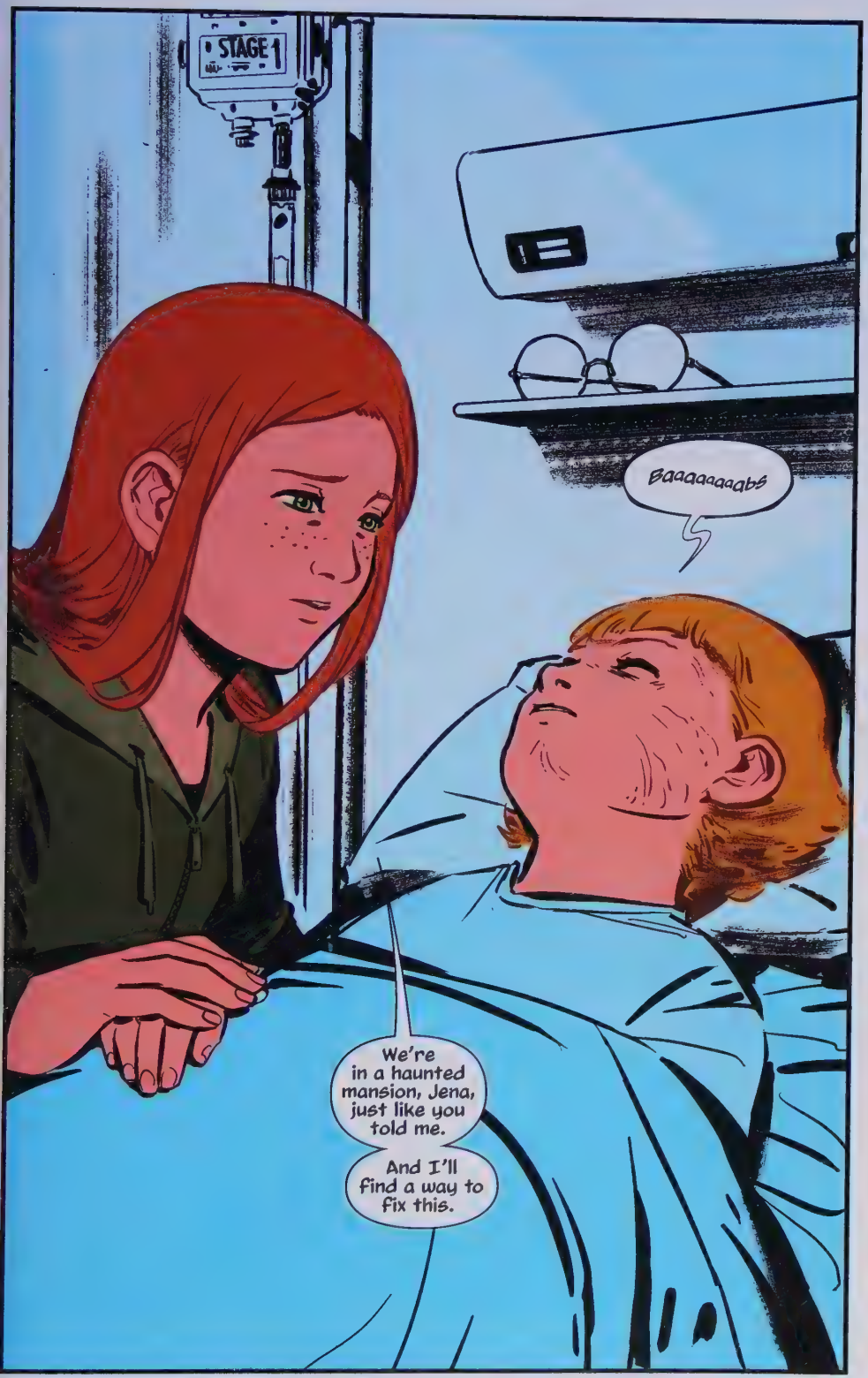
I'm so scared. I hate it.
I know it's hard. But being afraid means you care. That's a *good* thing. You wouldn't be here if you weren't afraid.
I'm not sure it works like that.
Trust me.
Pssst!


STAGE 3

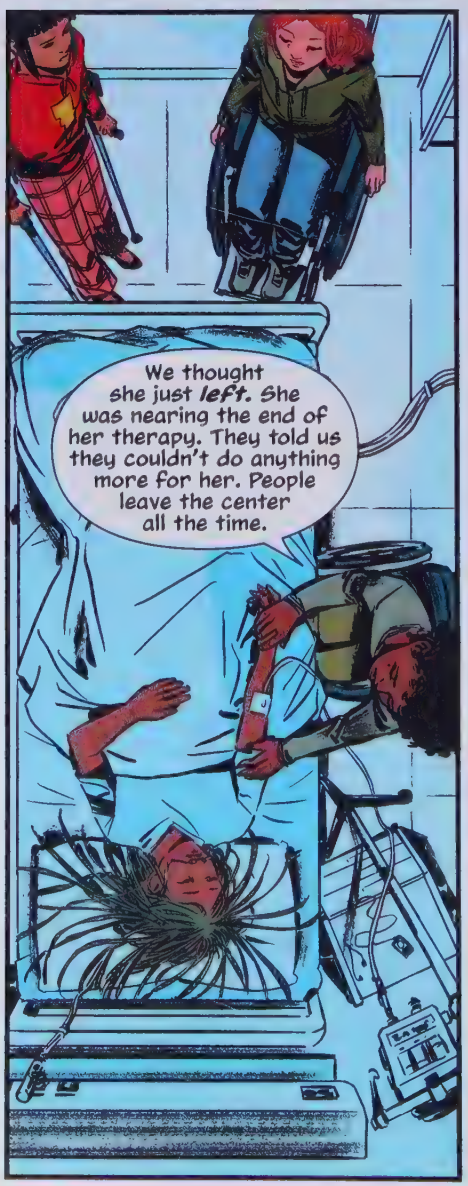
beep
Michael.
What have they done to him?

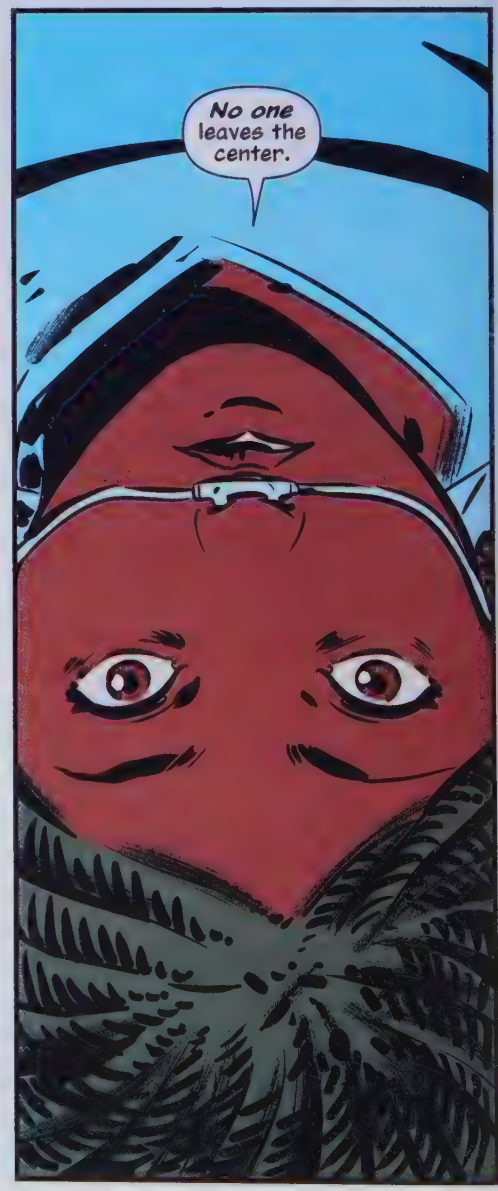

C'mon, Michael, wake up.

≥gasp≤


STAGE 1
Baaaaaaaabs
We're in a haunted mansion, Jena, just like you told me.
And I'll find a way to fix this.

Babs, there's someone else. Shanta.


We thought she just left. She was nearing the end of her therapy. They told us they couldn't do anything more for her. People leave the center all the time.


No one leaves the center.

Shanta!
≠cough≠ ≠cough≠
Are you all right? What is happening here?

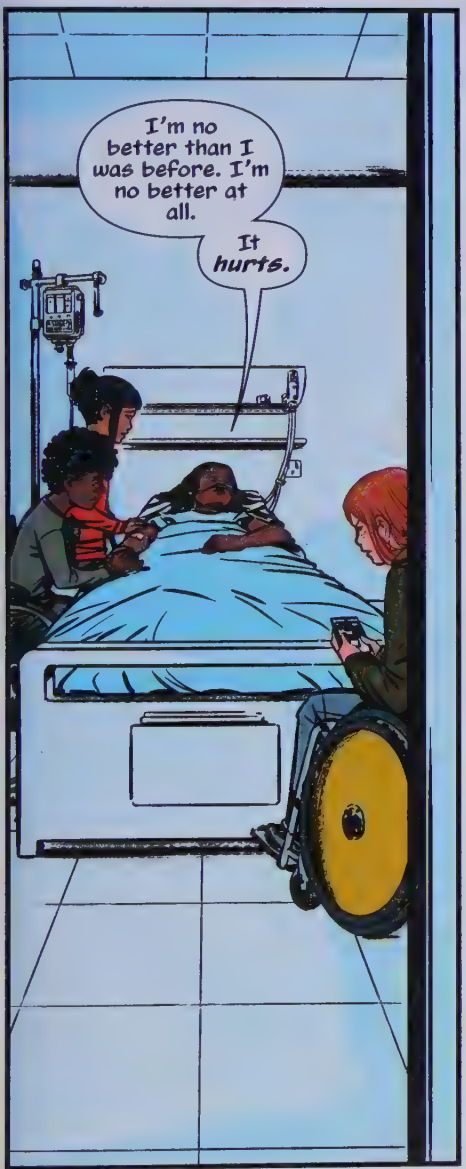
You found your way here. How did you find your way here? It's only ever the doctor and his therapies.
Babs found the secret passage. What is happening?

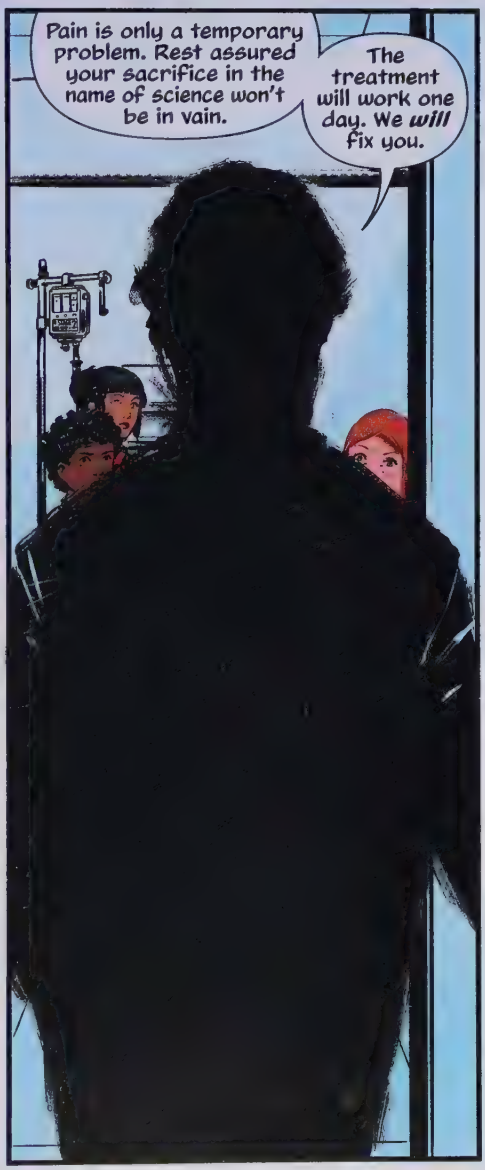
Genetic experiments. "Therapy." He wants to cure us. Cure disability. He's still... perfecting.
=cough=

He wants to help. He wants to fix us.
He... We're test subjects. No one will miss us.

You should call your father. Now.
On it.

He claims he's getting closer, though so far it hasn't worked.
No Network!
OK


I'm no better than I was before. I'm no better at all.
It hurts.


Pain is only a temporary problem. Rest assured your sacrifice in the name of science won't be in vain.
The treatment will work one day. We will fix you.

Why don't you put that phone away, Barbara? The signal should still be jammed, but let's not take any chances.
You could've just let us run our tests without interfering. What we do here is important.
For you. For us. For the greater good of all. So that no child should have to suffer being less than whole.

Dr. Lachlan? What is wrong with you?
We are whole! We won't let you do this!
Nononononono—
What you do here is torture.
How precious. How ignorant. I'm sure you understand the value of experiments in any science.
People are not experiments.
They are collateral damage. They are broken and won't be missed.
I'm sorry, Dad. I can't give up. I won't give up.

We're not broken, you pathetic excuse for a doctor. You are supposed to aid us.
You children can't see the bigger picture. This is aid.
If we are successful, no one will suffer anymore. This will change the world. We will change the world.
Now be quiet. Move.

I'll take that phone, thank you.
What a mess. I'm going to have to reboot the system. Backup all the data.
What will you do with us?

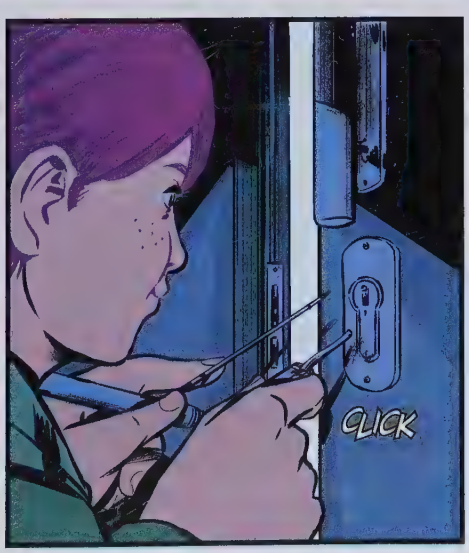
We would've done what's best for you.
Now, we'll have to make sure you stay out of the way.

CLICK
We're not giving up. Not now.
Not ever.
Not while we're fighting together.
I'm here. I'm still here.

So let's keep fighting.

How did you get that?
And how will it help us get out?

More hacking, old-school style.


CLICK

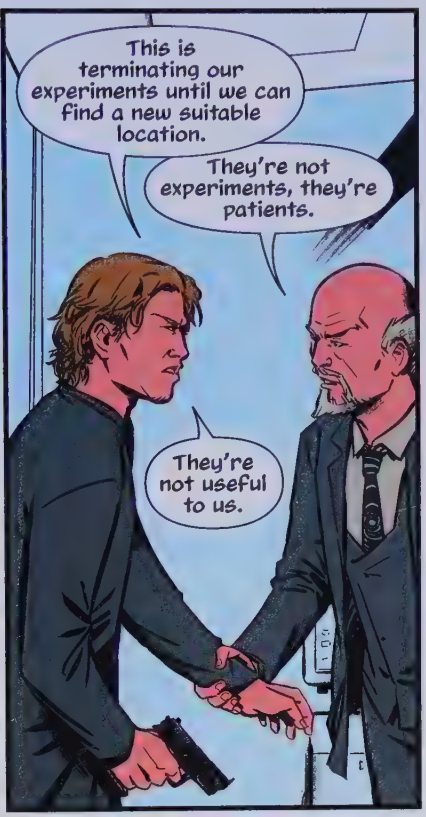
Careful. Follow me.

I didn't want to do this, but your friends left me no choice.
Keep quiet.

This close to a breakthrough. What a waste of energy and resources.

What are you *doing?*

I thought you took care of the Gordon girl's snooping around. Now look at this mess.
I ensured she couldn't call for help, but I didn't expect Barbara to discover this level. These girls are fighters, Lachlan. That's why we do what we do.
And I can't let you do whatever *this* is.


This is terminating our experiments until we can find a new suitable location.
They're not experiments, they're patients.
They're not useful to us.

We have to do something.
I'll distract him...
I *can't* let you do this, Neil.

And I won't let you stop me.

BANG
Then we'll stop you.

We trusted you!

Stop trying to fix us!

Get. Off. Me.

Yeong!
No!
BAM

You call yourself a doctor. You used us as guinea pigs!

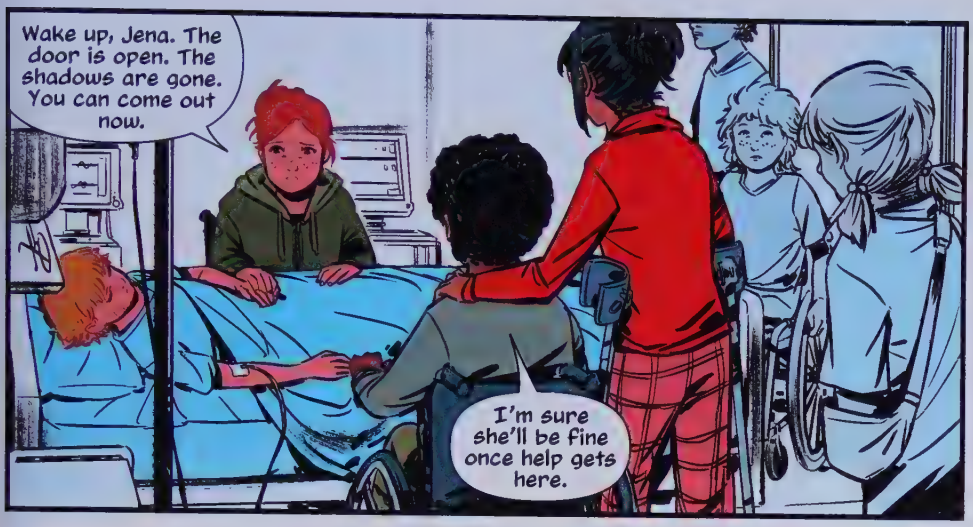
NOW!

Charge!
Get him!
SMACK

What is happening?
We'll fight, too!

We'll win.
CRUNCH
Argh!
Pain is only a temporary problem, Doc.
We don't need you to change the world.

I... tried to help you. ≒cough≒
You hurt us.
Our flawed science has failed you... too many of you...too often. Like Clara, you deserve to be healed.
We deserve to be human.
Does this mean we can go home?
I want to go home.
This is your community, Professor. We don't just come here to rehabilitate, we come here to live. And we will.


Wake up, Jena. The door is open. The shadows are gone. You can come out now.
I'm sure she'll be fine once help gets here.

And until then, we'll be by her side.
Speaking of which...

Signal's back. You should call your dad.

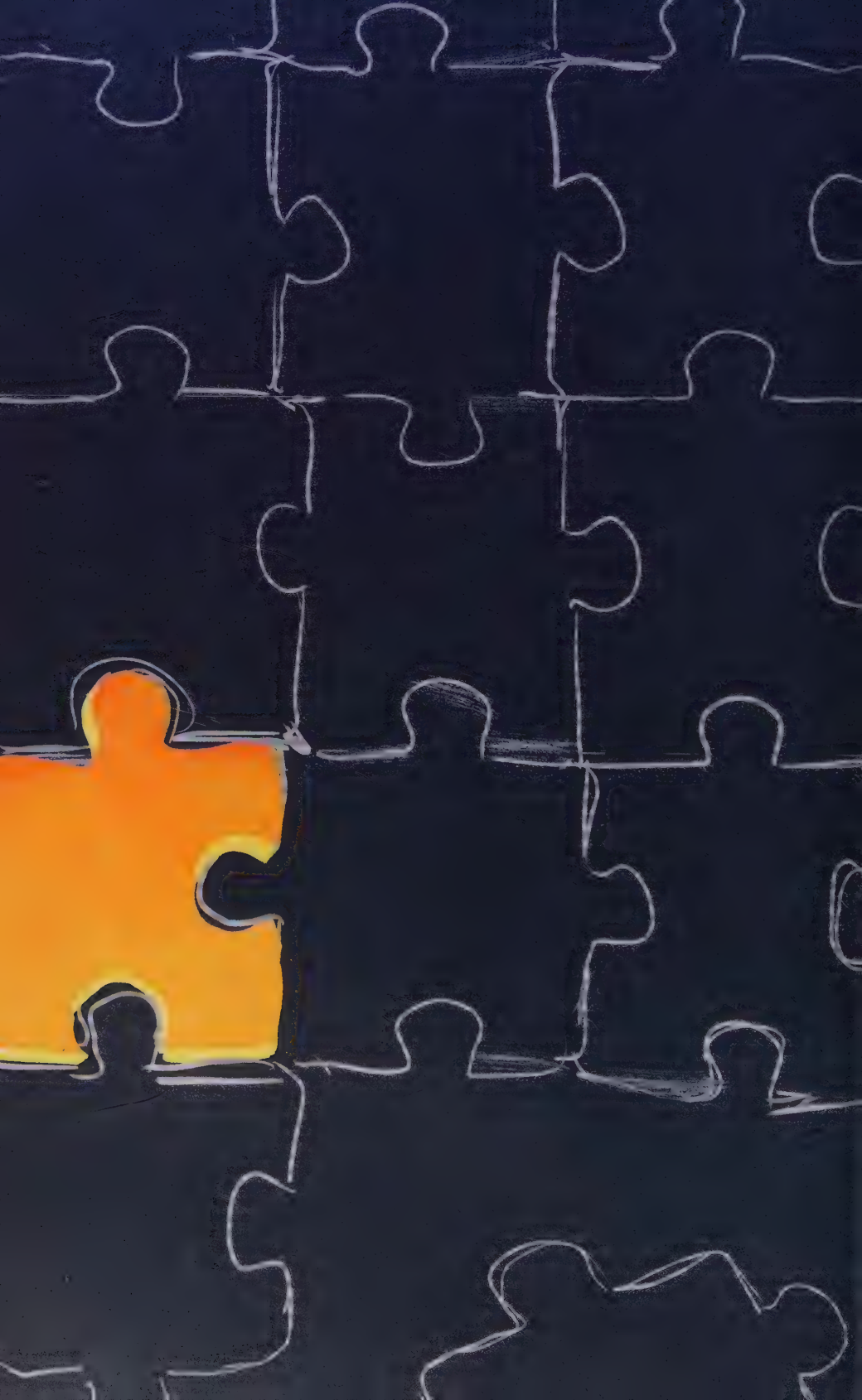
Hello?
Dad?

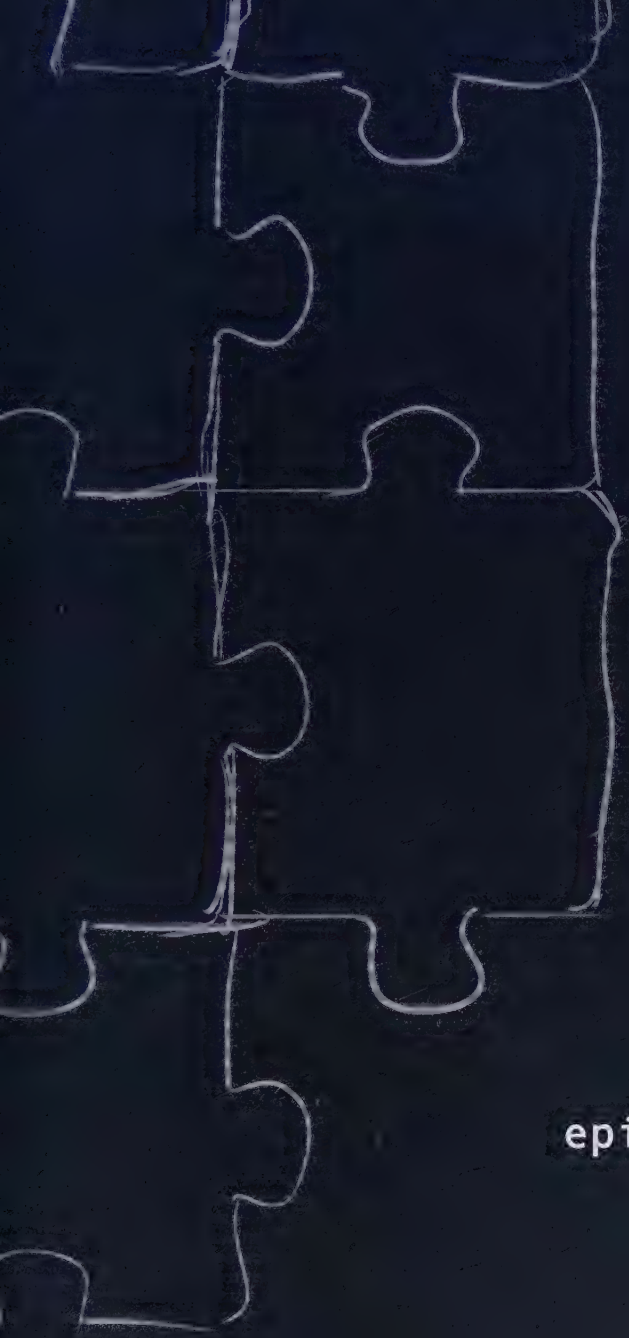
Dad! You've got to come here. To the center. There's a basement with a private ward. I have evidence, and—
Babs. Barbara. I'm already on my way.
Benjamin was worried when he couldn't reach you. He sent me all the information you found. You shouldn't have kept that from me, sweetheart.
But I should've trusted your instincts. I should've trusted you.
I was so afraid of losing you.
I was afraid of being lost.
I get it now, I think. I am who I've always been. And maybe I don't know who I will become yet, but I have all the time in the world to figure it out.

But you know, I was so scared, Dad. I thought I would stop being scared.
Sweetheart, I never stopped being scared either.
I knew you'd come.
I'm so infinitely proud of you.

I'm infinitely proud of us, too.
We're here. We're together. All of us.
I always thought I'd be fearless. I'm not. I don't think I'll ever be. And that's okay. Maybe Issy is right—if I were fearless, I wouldn't care enough. It's fear that keeps us sharp, that keeps us going, that keeps us figuring out the unknown.
GCPD
GCPD

STAGE
One puzzle at a time, one hack at a time, one story at a time.
And that's far better than flying.





epilogue_

GOTHAM CITY NEWS

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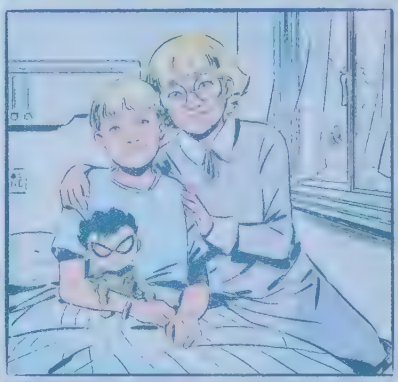
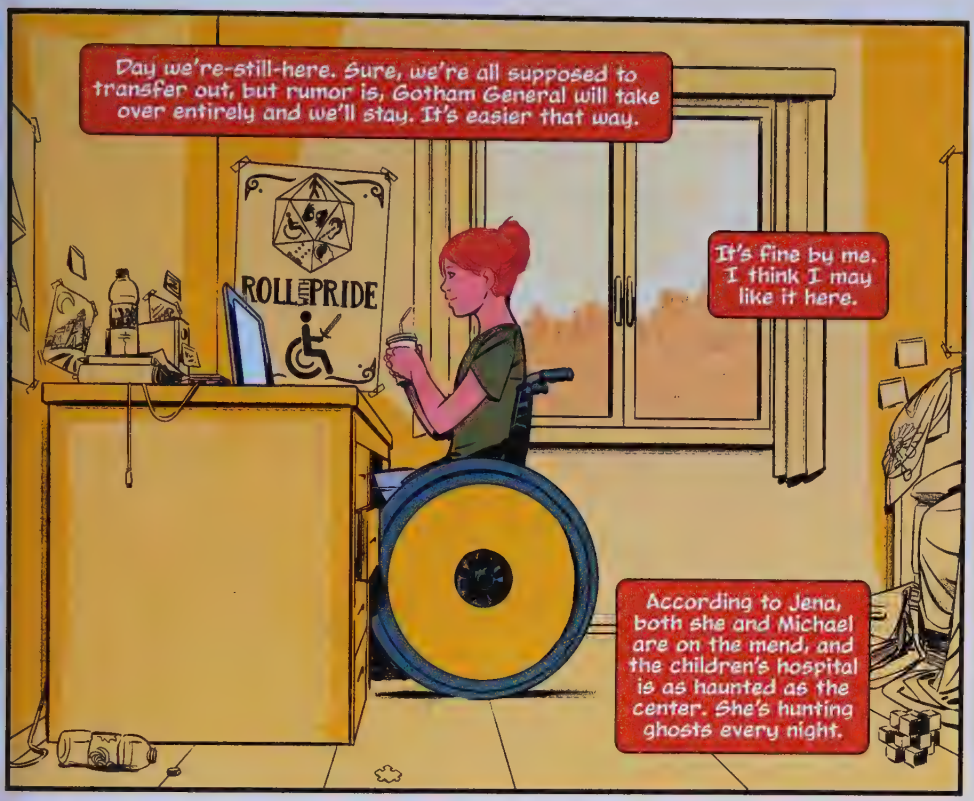


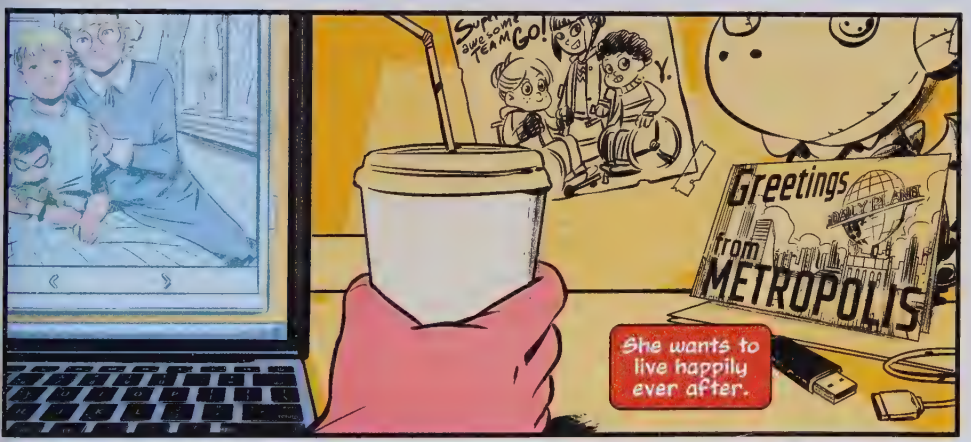
Jena and Michael Newton, dubbed by many the "tragedy twins," in their hospital room.

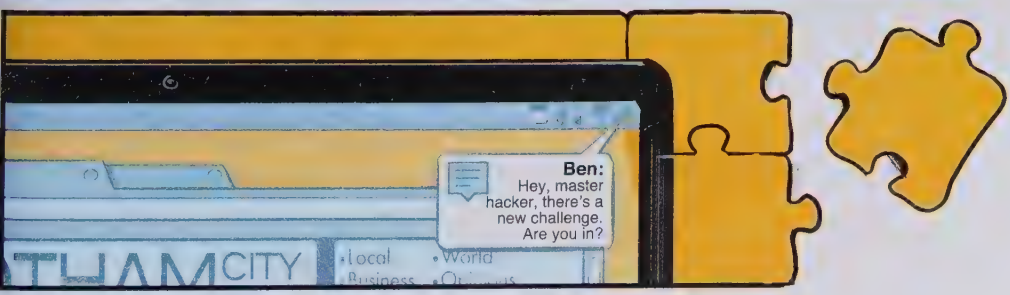
Children who were subject to the experiments have all been transferred to the children's hospital in Metropolis, where they'll receive the best care possible. The medical team heading up their treatment told our reporters they are still working to uncover the scope and consequences of the genetic experiments, but they are committed to doing whatever they can to aid the children. That'll be easier in some cases than others.

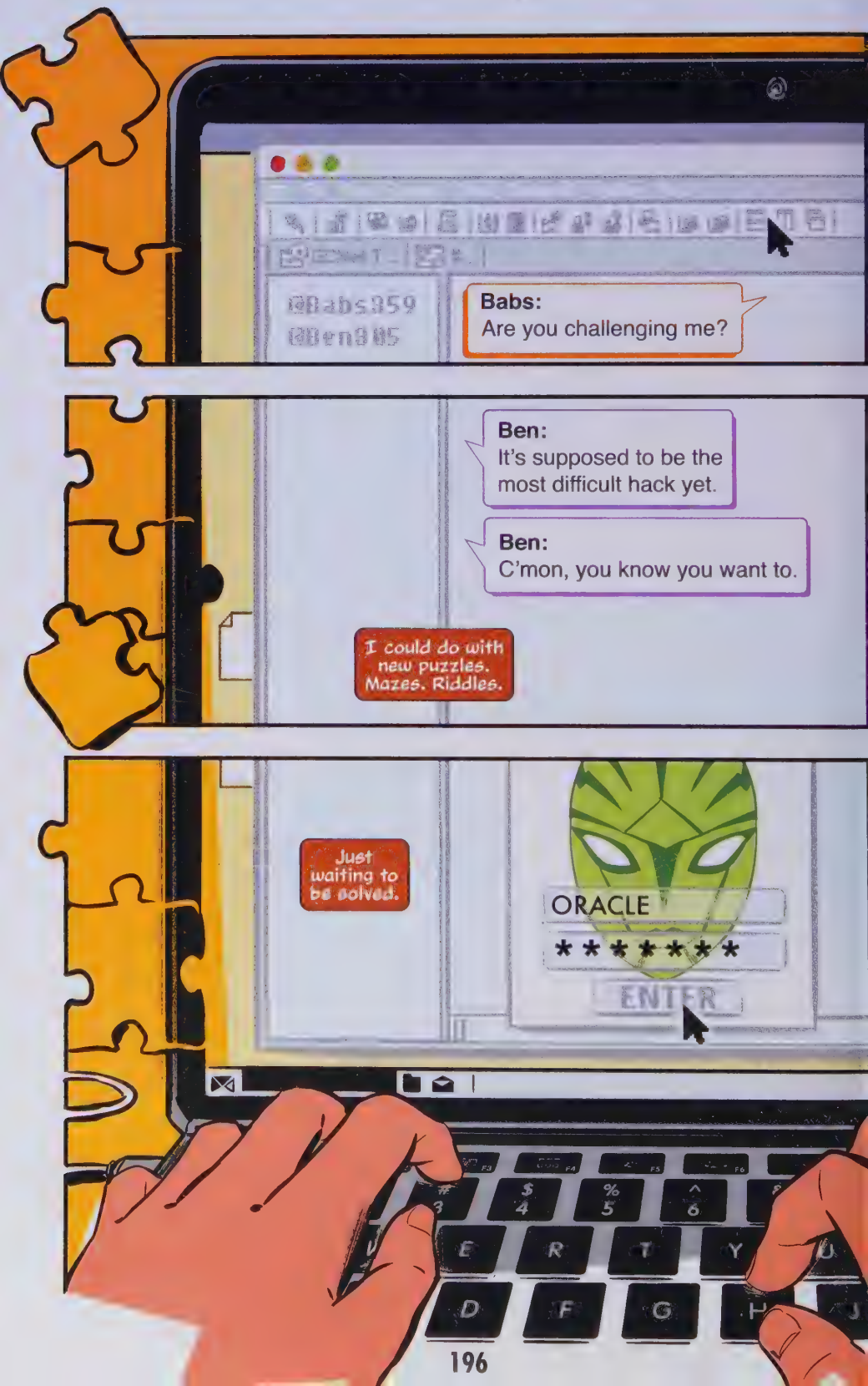
Meanwhile, the Arkham Center remains open, but under the oversight of Gotham General Hospital, until all remaining patients can be placed elsewhere. Multiple manslaughter and assault charges have been filed against Dr. Harland Maxwell and Dr. Neil Lachlan, as well as nearly one hundred medical malpractice lawsuits filed in civil courts.

The Arkham Center for Independence, the scene of countless illegal experiments.

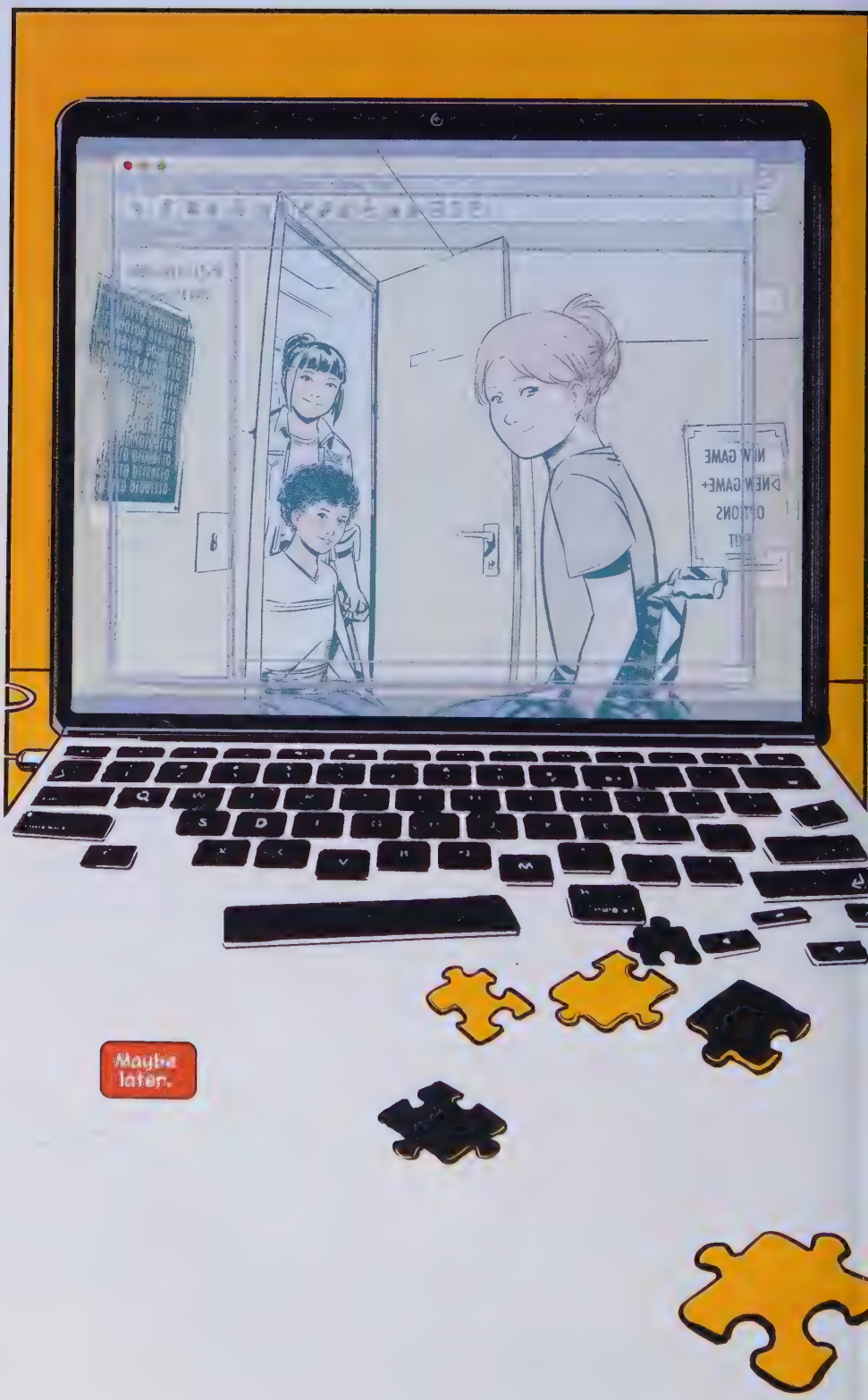

Day we're-still-here. Sure, we're all supposed to transfer out, but rumor is, Gotham General will take over entirely and we'll stay. It's easier that way.
ROLL PRIDE
It's fine by me. I think I may like it here.
According to Jena, both she and Michael are on the mend, and the children's hospital is as haunted as the center. She's hunting ghosts every night.


SUPER AWESOME TEAM GO!
Greetings from METROPOLIS
She wants to live happily ever after.


Ben:
Hey, master hacker, there's a new challenge. Are you in?
CITY
Local
World
Business


@Babs359
@Ben305
Babs:
Are you challenging me?
Ben:
It's supposed to be the most difficult hack yet.
Ben:
C'mon, you know you want to.
I could do with new puzzles. Mazes. Riddles.
Just waiting to be solved.
ORACLE
****
ENTER

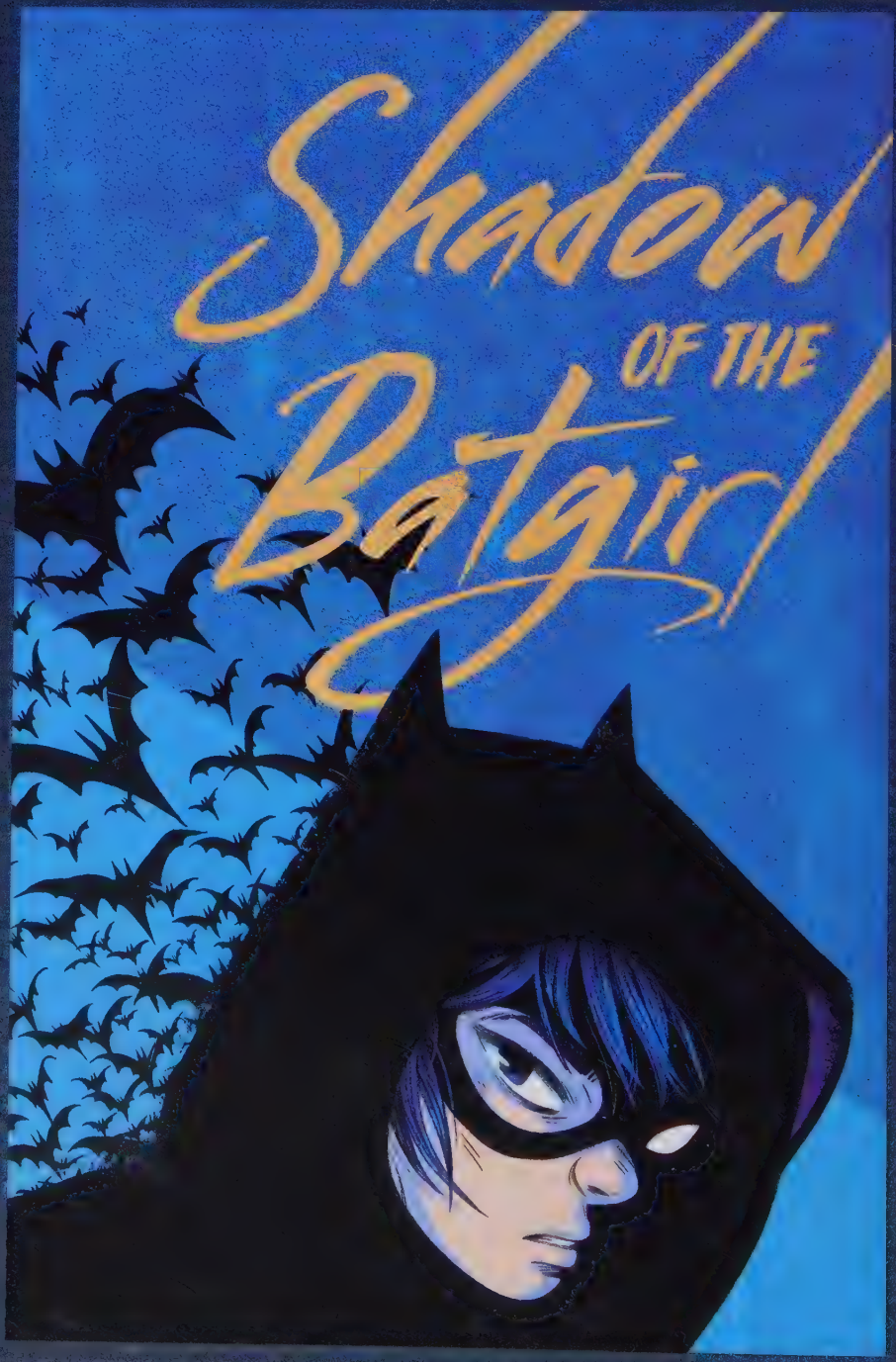
Ready.
Babs?
We're off to the pool!


Maybe later.

MARIEKE NIJKAMP is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *This Is Where It Ends* and *Before I Let Go* and the editor of the YA anthology *Unbroken: 13 Stories Starring Disabled Teens*. She is a storyteller, dreamer, globe-trotter, and geek. She resides in the Netherlands.

MANUEL PREITANO is an Italian illustrator and graphic designer, and the co-creator of the Destiny, NY series. He has worked on a wide range of toy designs, book covers, illustrations, and comic books, both in the U.S. and in his home country. He resides in Italy with his comic book collection and his beloved drawing tablet.

Cassandra Cain, teenage assassin, isn't exactly Batgirl material...yet.



From writer SARAH KUHN and artist NICOLE GOUX comes a harrowing story of a girl who overcomes the odds to find her unique identity.

Gotham City.
Midnight.
I am
Cassandra
Cain.
And this
is me...
before.

I wish I could say, "Before I became a normal teenager...
WHOOSH
SLASH
"...with normal teenager problems."
SMACK
Rrrgh!

Hnnnff...
Ugh...
But my problems have never been normal.
THUNK

huff
huff
Please... My daughter...
Tell my daughter...
This is when everything changed.

I'd killed in the past. It's what I was *trained* to do.
Please...
This time...for the first time, I couldn't go through with it.
Killing doesn't require words. So I hadn't been raised with many.
I couldn't read. I could barely speak. I didn't know much language. At all.
"Daughter" was one of the few words I *thought* I knew.
But...the way that man said it. The agony overwhelming his entire body...

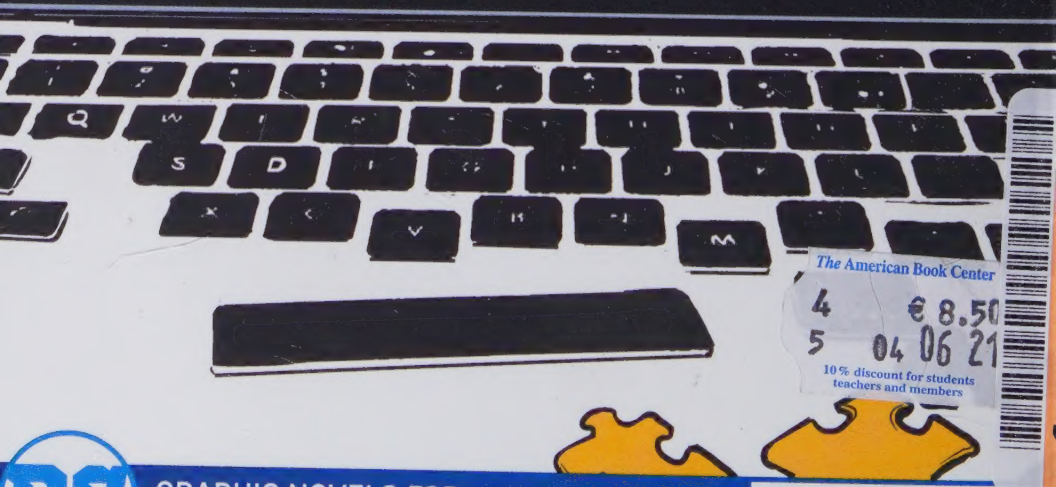
It flipped my whole world.
Hungry...
To be continued in Shadow of the Batgirl! On sale 2/4/2020

/*==========
#1 New York Times bestselling author Marieke Nijkamp and artist Manuel Preitano unveil a graphic novel that explores the dark corridors of Barbara Gordon's first mystery: herself.
==========*/

After a gunshot leaves her paralyzed below the waist, Barbara Gordon undergoes physical and mental rehabilitation at the Arkham Center for Independence. She must adapt to a new normal, but she cannot shake the feeling that something is dangerously amiss. Strange sounds escape at night while patients start to go missing.

Is this suspicion simply a result of her trauma? Or does Barbara actually hear voices coming from the center's labyrinthine hallways? It's up to her to put the pieces together to solve the mysteries behind the walls.

In *The Oracle Code*, universal truths cannot be escaped, and Barbara Gordon must battle the phantoms of her past before they consume her future.



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